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AN AUSTRALIAN HEROINE.



AN
AUSTRALIAN HEROINE.

BY
R. MURRAY PRIOR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

London :
CHAPMAN AND HALL, LIMITED, 193, PICCADILLY.
1880.

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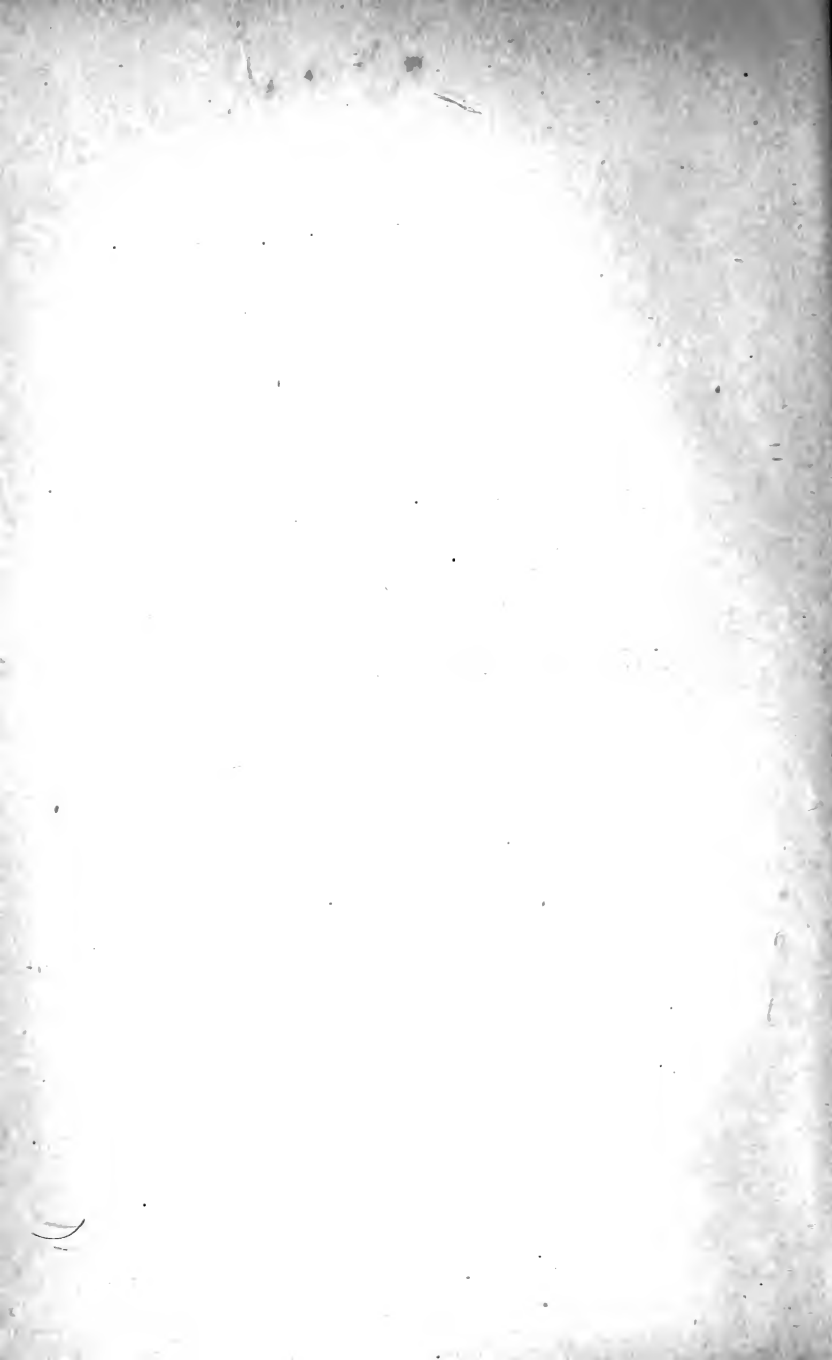
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AN AUSTRALIAN HEROINE.



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CHAPTER I.

THE ALLERTON BALL.

It was the night of the Allerton ball, crisp and frosty. The terraces in front of the house had long rows of lanterns which shed a dim illumination upon the whitey-brown ground and the frosted branches of the trees with their pendent stalactites. Crimson carpeting had been spread upon the stone floor of the portico, and as carriage after carriage drove up, the ever opening hall-door revealed to each new comer radiant glimpses of stately dowagers in diamonds and feathers, and of fair young girls in clouds of tulle and lace who looked as though they had been pelted by a capricious goddess of spring.

The supper had been ordered from Gunter; Coote and Tinney provided the music. Another

eminent firm had superintended the decorations. Everything that money or taste could achieve had been done to ensure a success.

The various large houses in the neighbourhood contributed parties, and among them Barwold was not deficient; for, as Lady Isherwood very properly remarked. When one's neighbours do give balls it is only considerate to do what one can to make them go off well, in the way of getting people from afar to attend them; and, moreover, it was a positive sin to allow one of Leonie's triumphs to run the risk of being wasted upon dull country people.

"That would indeed be throwing pearls before swine," said Mr. Lydyiard.

To the surprise of every one at Barwold, Mr. Lydyiard had, in accordance with Sir Emilius' repeated invitation, proposed himself, at the very time of the Allerton ball, and Lady Isherwood was somewhat aggrieved thereat, for she would have preferred a younger and more attractive man in his place.

"Are you going to the ball, Mr. Lydyiard?" asked Esther.

"I propose being present," replied he with gravity, "if I may have a seat in one of the carriages."

Lydyiard had had his reasons for coming down

to Barwold just then, and though balls were not much in his line he had made up his mind to be at this one. He had seen Bernard in London, and his inquiries as to the state of affairs at Woodchester had elicited the fact that George Brand was in the neighbourhood. Bernard had looked hipped and savage, and Lydyiard had jumped at a conclusion which he had partly come down to verify.

"You are not looking well, Esther," he said, when they were alone together.

"Oh yes! I am quite well," replied Esther absently.

"Are you troubled about anything, child?" asked Lydyiard searchingly.

"I don't know," she answered, looking down; "I have felt perplexed as to what I ought to do, but I think I have decided now."

"I saw Bernard Comyn in London," said Mr. Lydyiard, pointedly. "He left Barwold suddenly, it seems."

"Yes," replied Esther, with a deep blush.

"I fancied," continued Lydyiard, regarding her with attention, "from his manner, and other things, that you might have had something to do with his departure. Was it so?"

Esther had her face turned away, and kept it averted as she replied, "Yes; I sent him away."

"I am sorry," said Lydyiard; "I thought that perhaps you might have returned his affection; and Bernard, though he has many faults, and not least among them an instability of purpose and a tendency to self-confidence, has always been a favourite of mine."

"There is no use in talking about it," said Esther, in a high, hard tone which he had never before heard from her lips, and which checked further discussion. "It could never be. There was a strong reason against it. Don't let us speak of it again. It is only between him and me."

"One question more," said Lydyiard, "which has no direct reference to Bernard. I can respect your reticence. It is true that George Brand is at Grately?"

"Yes; we have been staying there."

"And he is the same? I mean that his feeling—his passion for you—has revived as strongly as ever?"

"Yes," said Esther slowly, "I suppose so." The entrance of Frederica put a stop to the conversation.

Just before dinner, Lydyiard was standing by the fireplace in the drawing-room, when Esther came down ready dressed for the ball, in fleecy white tulle with bunches of waxen flowers upon her breast and in her hair. Round her neck was

a string of valuable pearls, which Lydyiard had caused to be placed upon her dressing-table, with a note, in which he asked her to wear it as his gift. "How can I thank you?" said Esther, with all a child's pleasure in the pretty things.

Lydyiard could not repress an exclamation of pain at the associations which the sight of her and of the necklace round her throat produced.

"What is the matter?" asked Esther anxiously.

"Nothing. You are very like your mother, and these pearls are as much your right as my gift. She wore them."

"Were they hers?" cried Esther. "Oh, I shall prize them ten thousand times more. But how did you get them? I understand," she added. "They were a present from you which of course she returned. My poor mother—poor, patient, faithful mother! I know now," she said suddenly, looking at Lydyiard, "how her life was embittered. I know what was my father's crime."

"How? What! Who has told you?" asked Lydyiard eagerly.

"He forged Lord Coniston's name, and was transported. It was George Brand who told me—that was strange, was it not? There was a letter of his among Lord Coniston's papers, and George read it."

"Did he tell you anything else?"

"There was nothing else. There could have been nothing worse."

"It was George who told you this?" repeated Lydyiard, thoughtfully. "And he wishes still to marry you?"

"*He* does not mind the disgrace," said Esther, unconsciously emphasizing the pronoun. "You must see how it is," she went on, with an agitated longing to be reassured by Lydyiard, who had long ago partly given a bent to her motives. "You must see that there could be no one else to whom I could be the same. I owe myself to him. I promised that I would belong to him. We ought to be true to the past—you said so—my mother said so. She had cause for remorse, and there could be no worse pain than to reproach oneself for the sorrow of another."

"You are right, Esther; there is no pain so keen and corroding as that which comes to us from the knowledge that we have marred another life through a selfish eagerness to clutch at our own happiness."

His words seemed to have a cold, but direct, bearing upon Esther's case, but he had failed to catch at the questioning in her tone, and was thinking more of his own past experience than of her present doubt, as even with the most sympa-

thetic the current of mutual intelligibility sometimes passes by, and leaves an air-like sense of disappointment.

Just then, the guests at Barwold came trooping down. Lady Isherwood florid and magnificent ; Frederica in white, graceful as a lily ; and the other ladies in various degrees of splendour, till the private omnibus which was to convey the party to the ball promised to be well crammed.

To the astonishment of the Isherwoods, and the happy consciousness of Frederica, when they entered the reception-room at Allerton, they saw Bernard Comyn standing a little way behind Mrs. Welby and her daughter. Esther felt a sickening sensation at her heart, but, beyond a mere bow, he scarcely acknowledged her presence. The warm hand-clasp and sympathetic smiles of former meetings were quite wanting.

"Why, Bernard !" exclaimed Hermione, "I did not expect to see you here."

"He promised me ages ago that he would be at my ball," said Miss Welby, "and when you told me that he was not going to Barwold, I thought it would be too deliciously cheeky to write and convict him of a breach of his word. You see he couldn't allow his honour to be dragged in the dust, so he was obliged to make a martyr of himself."

“Miss Welby is right,” said Bernard. “I never break a promise, or give rise to false expectations, if I can help it. Miss Talmadge, may I have the pleasure of the first waltz?”

He went up to Frederica and wrote his name upon her card for several dances, but made no attempt to secure Esther. Presently Captain Brand appropriated and led her away.

“Who would have expected to see Lydyiard here? He tells me that he is staying at Barwold.”

“He came unexpectedly yesterday evening.”

“I did not know that he was on such intimate terms with the Isherwoods. I must go and have a talk to him presently. I have never seen him since that miserable day when I parted from you on the island. Poor Lydyiard!—he was always preaching prudence to me concerning a certain little girl. I’ll remind him of it by-and-by.”

George put his arm round Esther’s waist, and whirled her into the circle of dancers. He was at his best in a ball-room. Except at school, and privately with Frederica in Miss Talmadge’s kitchen, Esther had never waltzed, and she was too young not to feel a momentary exhilaration which lent a radiance to her eyes, and a flush to her cheek, that completely deceived Bernard as he looked on with Frederica upon his arm.

After the dance George led Esther into the conservatory. Bernard and Frederica had preceded them, and were standing together examining a flowery pyramid. "That will be a match," said George carelessly, as the couple passed back into the dancing-room. She is a very jolly girl, and I thought the first time I saw you all here together that he was spoony upon her."

Although she had in her heart voluntarily resigned Bernard to Frederica, the glory of satisfaction in her sacrifice was still far from Esther. George's careless comment made her writhe as though something sharp had struck her, and she was almost ready to cry out, "How can I bear it?" as upon that evening when she had discovered Frederica's secret. Her torture was not diminished by the bright look which Frederica threw back upon her, as she passed upon Bernard's arm.

"Let us sit down," said Esther, pointing to a cushioned bench in a recess near them; "I don't want to go back to the ball-room just yet."

"Nor I," exclaimed George; "though, by Jove! I believe that I am engaged to Frederica Talmadge for the next dance. I daresay she won't mind if I keep her waiting a moment. You're bosom friends, aren't you? I used to be

fond of dancing once, and up to any amount of fizz, but I suppose it is the result of falling in love with an inexcitable sort of a woman, that I had rather sit here and talk quietly than waltz. Esther, I have been longing for this evening—I made up my mind that I would get your answer to-night. The suspense would have been almost unbearable, if I had not felt nearly certain of you since I saw you wearing my ring at Grately. I have been very good, have I not?”

“Yes: you have been very good; but a man should always be good to a woman.”

“Because she is the weaker vessel. By Jove! I don’t quite see that reasoning, when she won’t do what is best for her. I wish you were as good to me, Mousie, as I want to be to you. You’ll give me a definite promise now— You’ll let me speak to your uncle,” he continued, seeing that she did not look up or reply. “Let me tell him that we are engaged. It is so, dear Esther, is it not?”

“If you wish it,” said Esther slowly. “George, I will try to please you, and to make you happy. You are different from any other man to me; but it is right to tell you that I don’t love you as you love me. I don’t feel now as I felt when we were together upon the island.”

"That is, because everything is changed between us now to what it was upon the island," said George, with easy conviction. "Of course it would not be natural for you to feel quite the same. When we are married, and settled at Grately, you will have everything your own way, and will be as happy as the day is long. It is a capital neighbourhood, and you need never feel dull."

Poor Esther! This was not the kind of reassurance for which her soul was yearning.

"I think," she said, "that I should like to sit here by myself for a little while, if you don't mind leaving me."

"Must I go? You are a little cruel still, Mousie; but I must not grumble now because you are cold. I feel so happy now that it is all settled. Dearest Esther, I wish you loved me as I love you." He put his arm round her waist and lifted her hand to his lips, kissing it impassionately.

Esther drew back, shrinking from the caress with a repugnance for which, at the moment, she could not account.

"Will you kiss me to-morrow, when we are alone?" said George, rising a little flushed.

"I want you to be kind and patient with me for a little while," said Esther; "I will try to do

everything that you would like. There is the music striking up ; oughtn't you to go ? ”

George departed reluctantly. “ I'll come back as soon as it is over,” he said.

In his elation, he confided to Frederica that all was settled between himself and Esther, and received as full a measure of assurance and congratulation as was natural from a young female confidante, who believed herself certain of her friend's feelings. He was returning from the tea-room to the conservatory to rejoin Esther, when he met Lydyiard in the hall ; the two men had not as yet interchanged greetings.

“ Hallo, old fellow,” cried Brand, excited from various causes. “ Who would have dreamed of seeing you here ? I fancied till this evening that you were looking after your colonists on the island, and shall expect to meet old Overstone with his pamphlets on salt and immigration at the next turning. How does the settlement get on ? I have no end of things to say to you ; but I left Esther in the conservatory a few moments ago, and must go and find her.”

“ Esther is in the ball-room dancing,” said Lydyiard. “ She passed me just now.”

“ Then come in here, and have a yarn, as our Australians would say,” said Brand, leading the way to the empty billiard-room, upon the other

side of the hall, and throwing himself upon one of the raised benches. "You are staying with the Isherwoods. Did you ever see a girl so improved as my sweet little Haidée? I thought I had forgotten her; but by Jove! when I saw her again here, for the first time since we had parted upon the island, it was all up with me. Do you remember how you used to rate me for making love to her in the old days? I suppose when I tell you that it is all settled between us, and that I mean to marry her, you will think me an ass for taking a girl without a penny—when—I don't mind telling you in confidence—I had the chance of fifty thousand down, and as much to follow."

"I think that the man who is fortunate enough to gain Esther's love ought to consider himself favoured above his kind. Such a girl will never want for suitors."

"She is a beauty, and a pretty face plays the very devil with a fellow like me. You always had a great fancy for Esther, Lydyiard; I never could quite make it out. Of course she is in love with me, though she is not quite so romantic about it as she was upon the island. I was a god to her then, but she is older now, and a girl becomes less open about her feelings as she learns more of the world."

“And what does she say to your long silence? to the small account you made of her love when she was apparently so much beneath you in social position?”

“I have explained that. She knows how I was situated, and a sensible girl would see at once that I was not to blame. If you come to social position, Lydyiard, Esther’s antecedents are as shady as they could well be. There are not many men who would go down on their knees to the daughter of a felon. You must know Hagart’s story. I always suspected that you had an inkling of his former history. Fortunately people about here either knew nothing about him or have forgotten him; but the fact remains the same. If Esther were an heiress a man might be more ready to overlook it, but I don’t suppose she will have a farthing from old Isherwood.”

“Probably not.”

“The estate is heavily burdened through Charles’s extravagance, and they are retrenching as far as they can. A provision for Esther would naturally come out of that set aside for younger children, and I believe that is all swallowed up. Well, they won’t expect me to do much in the way of settlements—I will not deny that money is an object to me. It was always intended that I should marry my cousin Lina; but when

Esther came on the scene again, all thoughts of that kind went to the winds. Lina is an uncommonly jolly, amusing girl; and though she is small, she is certainly very handsome; but there is something about Esther which makes her more attractive than most women. I suppose it is her unlikeness to them. There is something spiritual—refined; what do you call it? about her. I daresay most fellows would think me a fool for chucking away a fortune, and a lively and pretty wife, for a charm which I can't define; but I don't regret my choice in the least. There aren't many men who could say that."

"No," replied Lydyiard; "perhaps not."

"I suppose you have heard that my uncle treated me infernally at the last. He took offence about something he had heard, and kept the bare letter of his promise in leaving me Grately; but all his other money went to a library, or something of the sort."

"I thought the Grately property was worth from three to four thousand a year."

"Yes; but what is that to keep up such a place? I think the county ought to subscribe a handsome sum for its restoration—antiquarian interest, and all that rot. They'll cry shame upon me if I let Elizabeth's banqueting-hall tumble down for want of tinkering up. It costs

money to live like one's equals in England, if one means to enjoy oneself at all. A bachelor without landed property can do as he likes, but a place is the deuce for swallowing up one's income. However, I suppose that a country gentleman ought to marry; and Esther will not have extravagant tastes."

"No," replied Lydyiard. He seemed thoughtful, and anxious to draw George out, before approaching the subject that lay upon his mind. George's eloquence seemed exhausted. After a pause, Lydyiard continued: "I suppose that you weighed the matter of marriage well before deciding."

"I don't know about that," said George lightly; "when I take a fancy to a thing I generally buy it, if it is to be had. That is rather a coarse way of putting it, I suppose, but it expresses what I mean. I saw Esther, and fell in love with her, that is about the long and short of it."

"But you have taken other things into consideration; you have thought of the children that may be born to you—of the taint which Esther may have innocently inherited?"

"Oh, as to that!" cried Brand, "that is your political economist way of looking at it. I never went in for that sort of thing. It is a far-fetched

idea of justice, I think, to make a girl responsible for the sins of her ancestors. Esther is none the worse individually because her father wrote my uncle's name instead of his own."

"George," said Lydyiard, "I should be false to my deepest convictions of personal responsibility and abstract moral right, if I did not warn you to consider well the drawbacks of a marriage with Esther. I should put the case in like manner before any one who contemplated making her his wife; that is to say, if I were in a position to speak to him upon the subject. We rationalists, as we are called, look at such matters from a scientific, not a sentimental, point of view. It is a proved physiological fact that tendencies are transmitted through the parents to succeeding generations; and if a man marries the daughter of a lunatic or a dipsomaniac, he does so at serious risk to his posterity. I have known men who have carried their convictions upon this point so far that they have refused, upon the ground of heredity, to marry the daughter of a felon, a *divorcée*, or an illegitimate woman. The latter taint implies on the female side — not necessarily, but presumptively — a corresponding tendency."

"Esther is not illegitimate," exclaimed George.

"If she were—what then?"

"I don't think as you do," replied Brand. "How many fellows marry women with taints of that kind! I don't believe in all that scientific twaddle. It is very well in theory—but men will be men, and we must take the risk. The world gets on very well as it is, and if one were always studying questions of far-fetched morality there would be no enjoyment in existence. If it were so with Esther, I should only be paying a little dearer for my pleasure. What do you mean by such insinuations? Do you know anything about Esther's mother?"

"Brand," said Lydyard, evading the direct question, "you were right in saying that you put the matter coarsely just now. You don't mind paying dearly for your pleasure. A man has a right to calculate the cost of a thing that he desires; but the question is not a purely selfish one—there is a moral responsibility attaching to it. Esther is not a horse, or a dog, or a slave. She is a being as high as you, or higher in the scale of creation than you are—to whom you owe a duty apart from your own gratification. You want to marry her. Your wish appears upon the surface generous and disinterested; but it occurs to me, that if it be with you purely a consideration of price, when you have tasted of your pleasure, and perhaps satiated yourself with it,

you may feel that you have paid dearly for your enjoyment. In that case, how would Esther fare ? ”

“ If you mean that I should regret having married her, and should ill-treat her in consequence, you can hardly give me credit for being a gentleman.”

“ There are different ways of ill-treating a woman, just as there are many degrees of comparison in the term ‘ gentleman.’ A so-called gentleman does not beat his wife, or actively ill-use her ; but he may neglect her, he may indirectly bring home to her the fact that she is distasteful to him, an incubus of which he is weary. There may be jarring, sullen compliance with her requests, cold good-nights, indifferent kisses. If the wife be sensitive and passionate of nature, the husband may incur the terrible responsibility of having driven her to sin, as perhaps her mother was driven before her.”

“ I wish that you would speak out,” cried Brand. “ There is something behind your words. Do you mean that Esther’s mother was a—”

“ Stop ! ” said Lydyard. “ You must not use that term of reproach in connection with Esther’s mother in my hearing. I will tell you her history ; but I understand that I am speaking to a man of honour, and whatever influence my

information may have upon your conduct, I rely upon your good faith that it shall not be imparted to Esther or others."

"Very well," said Brand, "I give you my word not to mention anything you say."

"It is a painful subject to me ; I should have hesitated to broach it, had I not felt the pressure of responsibility. For Esther's sake, as well as for your own, and for that of right, I will not let you marry her, in the least degree in the dark as to her antecedents. When you have heard what I am going to say, the *onus* will have been removed from my shoulders. You know the story of Robert Isherwood's youth—that he was disgraceful in almost all his relations of life, and that he forged Lord Coniston's name, and was transported to Australia. At that time he was living in sin with the wife of another man, whom he had taken from her home—and that woman was Esther's mother."

"This then was the connection to which he alluded in his letter."

"I know nothing about the letter. Esther's mother was extremely beautiful. She was sensitive, enthusiastic, and of a wayward, passionate nature. She was of French extraction, and had been brought up by a maiden aunt, who, dying intestate, left no provision for the girl. She was

at this time befriended by—the clergyman of the parish—who laid her under some pecuniary obligations. He was dishonourable enough to urge these obligations in endeavouring to persuade her to marry him. He was a man of studious habits, and of repulsive personal appearance, and it was not surprising that she looked upon him rather as a jailor than a husband. That jailor who preferred his own short-lived gratification to her happiness was—myself.”

“You,” exclaimed Brand, in astonishment.

“Yes; I induced Esther’s mother, at the age of seventeen, to marry me out of a mistaken sense of gratitude. I never succeeded in gaining a spark of her affection. My devotion at first had only the effect of increasing her wretchedness and discontent, and was succeeded by coldness, estrangement, and, upon my part, absorption in my books. It was during the years following my marriage that I began to question the authority of the Church, and that I became sceptical of the superstitions I had been preaching. Doubt, inquiry, scientific and literary research engrossed me, and my wife and I were practically separated when Robert Isherwood appeared in the scene. He was young, handsome, artistic, and I suppose, poor woman, craving as she must have been for emotional

excitement of some sort, that she fancied she had found a congenial soul. They eloped; and it was in pursuing the guilty pair that I met with the accident which maimed me as you now see me. Jealousy and resentment made me unwilling to sue for a divorce, which in those days was more difficult of attainment than now; and they were denied the poor satisfaction of marriage. After my wife's desertion, I gave up the Church, in which my views no longer permitted me to remain, and went to live abroad. There I was brought into contact with minds of a similar bent to that which mine had taken. My habits of life and thought changed entirely. From an evangelical clergyman I became what is termed a free-thinker. With the widening of my views came the enlargement of my sympathies. As my narrow, self-assertive dogmatism gave place to an exacter apprehension of the sequence of cause and effect, of good and evil resultant from each other, there came to me as well, a more distinct appreciation of human nature, a more active interest in the higher phases of life, a levelling of individual desire, and exaltation of idealized humanity as the true object of worship. You don't follow me, Brand. Well, I realized that in fettering a young fresh life for my selfish pleasure I had committed a wrong against

society and against an individual which it was out of my power to redress. Years after my wife had left me I made an effort to discover her whereabouts, and learned that Robert Isherwood had been transported for forgery, and that she, bearing an unborn child, had disappeared. Further search seemed useless, and I tried to escape from the thought of her fate, and to turn my mind into scientific and benevolent channels ; but all my life a sense of moral culpability has embittered my plans for benefiting the race, and has interfered with my self-satisfaction. You were with me when upon Mundoolan Island I came upon the traces of my wife. She had been faithful to the man for whom she deserted me, with a fidelity far surpassing that of many virtuous wives,—but Esther, her child, was not born in wedlock, and has legally no right to the name she bears.”

“The Isherwoods are not aware of that,” said Brand.

“No ; Sir Emilius takes Esther for granted as his brother’s legitimate daughter. And I do not imagine that they have cared to make inquiries about the antecedents of Esther’s mother. The girl herself is totally ignorant of what I have told you, and I should be sorry indeed for it to come to her knowledge.”

Brand got up, and going to the table knocked about the billiard balls for a moment.

"Well!" said Lydyiard with impatience, seeing that George appeared immersed in the making of cannons.

"Of course, it is very kind of you to have told me the story. There is nothing I hate so much as being taken in—but, you see, no one need know it beyond ourselves; and society is not likely to ask for Mrs. Brand's baptismal register. I mean to marry Esther."

"You have quite made up your mind."

"Confound it!" cried George, missing a cannon. "My mind does not want such a lot of making up, when I have set my heart upon a thing."

"You will not at any future time wound her sensitiveness by holding up to her your disinterested conduct."

"Oh, hang it all! a man does not want to be cramming that sort of thing down his wife's throat. Of course I shall behave like a gentleman to her."

"I hope that you may never regret having married her, and that you may make her happy."

"I don't suppose that there is any doubt about that," said George. "And now I think

that I had better go back to her. She will be wondering what has become of me."

The two men returned to the ball-room together. Dancing was at its height, and the band was playing in that dreamy, bewildering way that always imparts to a gay scene a suggestion of unreality. Fair girls jostled each other in the dance, and gold-laced, red-coated officers vied in brilliancy with gorgeously attired county matrons. Hot-house flowers bloomed in every corner, and the parquet floor gave back the glitter of lights and jewels. Mrs. Welby attitudinized like a Sultana upon a raised couch at one end of the room, and Lady Isherwood enthroned by her side, simpering and fat, with a still peach-like bloom upon her complexion, and dazzling neck and arms, saw in the brilliant spectacle below her a reflection of her own period of belle-ship.

"They do this sort of thing very well, don't they," said George, with just a tinge of discontent in his tone.

"Yes," replied Lydyiard, abstractedly.

"I know who you are looking for," said Lina Welby, tapping her cousin playfully on the arm with her fan. "Mr. Lydyiard, isn't it too hard upon me that I am not to be the cynosure of every eye to-night? Dearest boy, this is my

twenty-first birthday, and you have not paid me one pretty little compliment—and I have had such quantities of sweet, comforting speeches showered upon me, that I feel as though I had been morally shampooed. It is too awfully delicious to be allowed to think oneself a person of consequence for one evening of one's life ; though, alas ! I shall be painfully alive to the fact that I am a frump, and nothing but a frump, to-morrow. There she is, you naughty boy. Doesn't she look too sweet and romantic in her white dress ? ”

Esther passed in the whirl, dancing with one of the officers of the garrison at Woodchester, and fully justifying Miss Welby's somewhat gushing encomium. Flushed with exercise, and with the excited resolution she had made, not to let Bernard see that she was wounded by his coldness, she looked more than usually attractive. She was certainly Lina's rival in the belleship of the evening, and George, in his elation at her success, gave out hints of proprietorship which swelled the rumours already current in the room of an engagement between them.

It is doubtful whether Miss Welby's enthusiasm for Esther was as deeply rooted as she wished people to believe, but she acted her part well, and gave not the smallest ground for a

hint that she was wearing the willow. The dowagers nodded their approval of Esther, and delivered their verdict.

“A very sweet-looking girl that Miss Isherwood, and remarkably like one of the portraits at Barwold.” Lina was ready to whisper a slightly garbled version of the island story—“a most romantic affair that happened two or three years before, when George was quartered in Australia;” and to hint that it was she who had brought about the second meeting, and who rejoiced most in the *dénoûment*.

Bernard was one of those who received her version of the story, and went afterwards to Frederica for its confirmation. He received it fully.

“Dear Esther,” said Miss Talmadge, expansively, “I think, I hope that it is all settled. I am certain that he wishes it, and now she will be happy. I don’t know whether you have felt as I have about Esther, that though she is so sweet and dear, there has always seemed something wanting to her perfect contentment.”

During the evening, whenever Esther saw Bernard’s figure it appeared to be in close juxtaposition with that of Frederica. They danced together time after time, and Frederica looked

radiant. Esther felt sure that they were speaking about her, for almost every time that she glanced in that direction their eyes seemed to meet hers. When Bernard was not dancing he haunted the doorways, and she was perpetually surprising his gaze, cold and disapproving. George encompassed her with loverlike attentions, and flattery seemed in the air around her; but do what she would to stifle her pain, it would not be crushed.

Bernard was standing near their hostess when the Isherwoods took their leave.

"Bernard," exclaimed Lady Isherwood crossly, "what has come over you? I think that you are extremely rude. You have taken no notice of any of us except Frederica. Are you coming to Barwold?"

"Not this time, Hermione."

"Why not? I have the McIntyre girls, and everything will be so flat to-morrow. Come over in the afternoon, at all events, for some music. Come to oblige me; I want a young man sadly."

"No, Hermione; I must go to London to-morrow."

"Then all I can say is, you are most inconsiderate, and your manners are excessively bad. You are ready enough to come when it

suits your convenience. I believe that you are looking after Lina Welby."

"Hermione, for mercy's sake don't bother me any more. I can't come. There's an end of it."

Miss Welby squeezed Esther's hand rapturously as she bade her good-night.

"You nice, comforting person, I am coming over soon to see you. George has given me the tiniest hint of what is going to happen. It is all settled, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied Esther, hardly knowing what she was saying. "I suppose that it is all settled."

On the following day George rode over to Barwold, and had an interview with Sir Emilius, satisfactory in all but a monetary sense, and before evening a great portion of the county had got wind of the arrangement. Bernard heard it for certain at Allerton just before he took the night train to London. Though it was only what he had expected, he was bitter and indignant at the thought of having been fooled, and Lina's story of the island romance, as she called it, only made him more resentful. It was plain to him that the sympathy which he had fancied had existed between himself and Esther had been wrought out of his own imagination; for,

granting that she had always cared for this handsome, dissipated-looking young coxcomb, whom Bernard had already mentally convicted of coarseness, swagger, and incapability of interpreting a high motive or intellectual aspiration, what bond could there be between her and himself, and what could that passionate handclasp upon which he had built so much—those sudden eye appeals and passing blushes—have meant more than the pleasurable gratification of a woman's vanity?

Bernard, when he reached London, took a freak of exercise and fencing, then of reading in the British Museum, and finally shut himself up in his chambers, and worked steadily at his book—Lydyiard, whom he consulted upon his affairs literary, though not upon the state of his heart, being pleased with his rough draft, and predicting a future of healthful mental discipline.

Frederica went back to Magenta Terrace shortly after the announcement of Esther's engagement.

"So Esther is going to be married," was Miss Talmadge's comment upon the news Frederica brought. "And to the nephew and heir of Viscount Coniston, with whom I was on terms of acquaintanceship—I may almost say intimacy—during a winter spent in Rome with Lady Susan

Starkie. You might mention this, my love, in writing to the Isherwoods. A pale-faced slip of a girl without half your beauty, and none of your advantages. Well, Providence ordains the lot of each of us; and the Glencairnes, my love, have always been above the vulgar prejudice in favour of matrimony. It is not always in dinner company and county society that one finds a congenial soul, as I, who was invariably the cynosure of any circle in which I happened to find myself, have reason in saying."

Miss Talmadge was in truth somewhat disappointed that her niece had not achieved a brilliant match, and this was her way of showing it.

Frederica settled down calmly again to her work, and painted diligently to make up for lost time. She was more silent and thoughtful than she had been, and her inner life seemed to have received a new spring, which made itself evident in lapses into reverie, and long hours spent at the piano over the music she and Bernard had been in the habit of playing together. The old lady plied her with questions as to the Barwold *ménage*, following all her movements with a touching anxiety to discover whether the ways of Magenta Terrace jarred upon nerves strung to a more harmonious key—endeavouring to prove

the superiority of the Talmadges to the Isherwoods in a manner that was almost pathetic ; but Frederica made no sign of discomfort, and seemed too wrapt up in her own dreams to heed externals.

Meanwhile it had been decided at Barwold that Esther's wedding should not be delayed longer than was necessary. Sir Emilius, delighted at his niece's satisfactory settlement in life, presented her with a good, round cheque for her trousseau, and in the early spring Esther and George Brand were married at Barwold, and went to Rome for their honeymoon.

CHAPTER II.

THE HONEYMOON.

“I CANNOT bear it,” poor Esther was crying in childish helplessness, as she sat alone in a dimly-lighted room in Rome. She was dressed for going to an assembly, more richly perhaps than she had ever been in her life, and the sumptuousness of her apparel gave a matronly character to her figure, which the falling tears and drooping curves of the mouth seemed to belie. “He does not really love me; he only cares because he thinks me pretty,” Esther continued brokenly to herself. “This was not what I thought it would be. I hate—I loathe—I am degraded—” She did not dare utter what it was that in her estimation degraded her; but her bosom heaved and her tears fell thicker. This was their first quarrel. There had been jarring, more or less painful, but never open discord. He had never left her in anger as he had done to-night.

A young wife's grief in a matter connected

with her marriage is only to be compared to the hopeless, passionate sorrow of a child, the intensity of whose young life seems out of all proportion to the slow beat of the lives around it. In both sufferers there is the same despairing protest; the same inability to cope with an uncomprehended phase of existence; the same helplessness in battling with disappointment. It is difficult for either the child or the woman to realize that there may be an intermediate condition between the extremes of happiness and of misery. The future seems all dark and tear-blurred; the cause of suffering disproportionate to the pain; and yet there are possible evils resulting from disunion, too terrible to be understood or defined, that cause the newly wedded wife to shrink in vague terror from the life upon which she has entered.

“I am sorry—I am sorry,” thought poor Esther feebly, and then—“If I knew whether I had done anything wrong.” And then came the despairing protest: “If he and I were different everything would be different too. It is because I am what I am, that I have angered him; and it is because he is himself that I shrink from him.”

Marriage is, to a girl, a sudden plunge into a phase of existence of which it has hitherto been

almost a shame to her to think. She finds herself breathing an atmosphere that had before represented to her an almost unknown condition of being. Freedom of thought and action seem to have been suddenly taken from her. The veil which has shrouded her maiden life has been violently drawn apart, and reserve struggles against the baring of sentiments, that have till now been sacred. She is in a condition of protest, and the sacrifice of all her young instincts, even when offered upon the altar of love, is entirely repugnant to her; but when the presiding divinity is a hard and ungracious Moloch, the martyrdom becomes a veritable immolation of all that is dearest.

It has been said, that in order to secure the greatest amount possible of connubial bliss, a young couple should start, as it were, from opposing poles of thought and disposition, and by gradually working nearer to each other, and rubbing off angles and excrescences, finally arrive at that absolute harmony which is so desirable in the married state. The proposition may, as regards its presumptive verification, be fairly stated, but it may be questioned whether, even granting the certainty of a happy result, the after felicity may not be counterbalanced by the mental wear and tear, and emotional waste

involved in the intermediate process of arriving at an understanding.

Esther and George were so far on their way to prove the truth or error of this reasoning. They were fashioned in totally dissimilar moulds, and the current of their feelings and impulses ran in opposite directions. From the commencement they took quite different views of their mutual relations. Esther had married George, actuated more by a high sense of honour, and by that purity of mind which makes fidelity to early vows a religion with some women, than by any impulse of love. She had told herself, in the conflict that she had undergone before consenting to be his wife, that a woman who passes readily from the arms of one man to those of another, is a despicable creature. The tenacity of her nature, the few but strong impressions of her girlhood, the keen gratitude for affection that had always been a part of her character, and the appearance of disinterestedness in George's wooing, all swayed her towards him. And then, to counterbalance her love for Bernard, there had been the impossibility of union, which his opinions had seemed to indicate; the vague desire to emulate his heroism. There was too the motive for renunciation in her wish to promote Frederica's happiness, and which contributed to impart all

the zest of high-souled sacrifice to her own marriage.

She was yearning after a fuller life in which she might devote herself definitely to another. She was ready to prick herself with thorns, if need be, so that she gained that higher goal. She was willing to subject herself to any discipline that might be made evident to her, which should suppress her longing after the more complete sympathy of Bernard's companionship, and encourage into more healthy life the struggling tenderness which was all that remained of her island love for George. She thought it would be so easy to smile upon an adoring slave; but her slight experience of men had not taught her that the ante-nuptial captive is often the post-nuptial master; and alas, poor Esther! the tension of all her finer feelings seemed to have electrified her sensitive temperament into a peculiar liability to suffer from the rubs and jarrings and small dissonances, that inevitably result from the union of an ultra-refined nature with one of a somewhat coarse mould.

George, upon his side, had no conception of any more subtle duties appertaining to the married state, than those implied by a settlement in proportion to his means; the provision of an establishment—horses, carriages, and dinners—

with the minor details of which it was the wife's business to concern herself; surface consultation of his companion's wishes; readiness to act as her escort to any places of interest or amusement she might wish to visit—except churches, picture galleries, and concerts of high-class music, which his soul abhorred—and a profusion of endearments, such as in the early days of marriage are presumably grateful to the wifely heart. But when Esther found that her husband's highest notions of companionship were limited to vapid addresses, that betrayed every moment an irritable and susceptible vanity, or at best a shallow, self-glorifying amiability; to kissings and fondlings of her cheeks and hair, and such-like amorous demonstrations, that from some inexplicable cause were distasteful to her—she shrank away from him, almost hating herself for so shrinking,—and avoided his touch with a sickening anticipation of the barren prospect that future years held forth. She could not have told accurately, what more than this lover's dalliance, she needed to make her happy, or, if not happy—contented. But that there was a horrible yawning vacuum, her whole being seemed keenly conscious, and her soul was perpetually yearning after the something it had not.

There appeared to be an utter dearth of

subjects of mutual sympathy between them. George had no great acquaintance with literature, and no feeling for art, or enthusiasm for the subjective interests of life. The abstract side of existence, which had a greater attraction for Esther than common-place realities, was to George a sealed book; and whenever she tried to divert conversation into channels that were congenial to her, George looked bored and uncomprehending, or ridiculed her fancies till they withered away.

Many of his peculiarities jarred upon her. His want of tact, and his selfish indifference to anything which did not directly bear upon himself, galled her; and his purposeless lounging was a perpetual source of irritation. His temper was under no control; and he was frequently angry and blustering over matters which seemed to Esther of supreme unimportance; such as the ill-cooking of a favourite dish, a delay upon a railway journey, or the delinquencies of their courier. Frequently by his whimsical petulance and unreasonable irritation he marred what would otherwise have been a day of enjoyment. Poor Esther! she was only learning the truth of the saying, that a man is no hero to his *valet-de-chambre*—and a wife being upon more familiar terms than a body servant, it is obvious that the aphorism, as applying to her, is doubly true.

They spent the first two months of their married life in Rome, and were beginning to mix in the English society there, when the misunderstanding occurred which left Esther crying in solitude in her bedroom; and gave her, for the first time since her marriage, a definite insight into her feelings.

They were engaged to an evening party at the house of one of George's English acquaintances, and Esther had appeared at dinner in a dress more than usually splendid and becoming. George was bored at the end of a day marked by no particular incident; and his boredom often took the form of abrupt transitions from fondness to capricious complaint, which at least afforded him the excitement of noting the effect of his manner upon a susceptible companion. Esther had seemed to him dreamy and unentertaining. He had taken rather more wine at dinner than was perhaps prudent; and when he re-entered the drawing-room, flushed and slightly unsteady, and called her to his knee as though she had been a spaniel, Esther recoiled with a visible unwillingness that provoked his rage.

"Come here, Mousie," he said; "you are looking very handsome to-night"—and as he spoke, he offered her a kiss.

Esther's whole being revolted against the implied command. She was herself shocked at the wave of repulsion that passed over her. It was impossible for her to be submissive and fawning like an Eastern slave. She rose from her chair, and gave herself a little involuntary shake, as though her fetters galled her; and without pausing to think, swept by him into her own room and locked the door. When she was alone, she trembled at what she had done, and at the comprehension of herself which her action had brought to her. Had it come to this, that she hated her husband, and that she was panting to escape from him? Why otherwise should his entrance, the very feeling of his breath upon her cheek, be so repugnant to her? Could any shock of calamity be more appalling than this discovery, that she disliked the man to whom she was tied? She felt a longing to annihilate the last few moments, and to resume the conventional, connubial attitude, which till now they had maintained towards each other. She would do anything, she thought, to repair her involuntary act. Could she not creep up to him, and plead indisposition, and entreat him to forgive her? He might be very angry, or he might be deeply grieved; under either circumstance, she felt that it would be almost impossible to go and

face him of her own accord. When, after a few moments, he turned the handle of the door violently, and knocked loudly and imperatively, some force stronger than herself seemed to glue her to her chair, and hold her down from rising to admit him.

"Esther," cried George in tones of stifled anger, "open the door this instant; let me in at once, or by —— I'll break into the room."

Esther rose then and turned the key. George entered in a storm of wrath. She had never known him so furious. He seized her arm, and shook her roughly, as she cowered trembling against the wall. "What did you mean?" he shouted angrily in her ear. "Is it that you do not like me to kiss you? You whom I have made what you are! It is true; you know it. What were you when I first met you? I am always thinking of you, always trying to please you; but you have not a spark of gratitude in your nature; and when I ask you for a kiss, you swerve away from me, and leave the room as though I had insulted you. What do you mean by it?—do you hear?"

Esther waited silent and unnerved till the storm had a little subsided. "Are you sorry?" asked George, more gently.

"I am sorry," said Esther, in a childlike gasp.

"I did not know what I was doing. Something came over me. I don't know why I did it. I suppose it is because we are different."

"Yes ; we are different certainly," said George ; "and you must change to something very unlike what you are at present if you want to live in peace with me. I am a hot-tempered man, and I hardly know what I am doing when I am in a passion. You had better take care how you provoke me, and don't give yourself d—d airs, and pretend to look down upon me as though you were a queen and I a chimney-sweep." He turned back into the sitting-room. She was frightened ; her arm tingled under her thin lace sleeve where he had grasped it. She followed him ; but George turned in the act of lighting a cigar. "No ; you had better stay in your own room ; I don't want your kisses now. You have repulsed me and driven me from you ; I am going out."

"We were to go to the Lawrences," said Esther.

"D— the Lawrences !" exclaimed George, and taking up his hat departed, slamming the door after him. It was then that Esther crept back to her own room, and in an agony of remorse, indignation, and despair cried : "I cannot bear it." She waited a long time, fancying that George might return, but he did not do so ; and when the clock struck half-past eleven, she

undressed herself, not wishing that her maid should see her tear-stained face, and crept into bed.

In the early morning she awoke with that crushed feeling which usually comes after emotion, every word that George had uttered in his wrath the previous evening so burned into her memory that it seemed impossible to face him under the calm light of another day without an explanation, which would be intensely harrowing, and might involve her in further trouble. But he came into her room when she was dressed, and asked her how she felt, without any reference to their quarrel. There was a slight blue bruise upon Esther's arm which she had regarded upon discovering it with a mournful shudder, and had hastily covered up again. It was very slight; but physical violence seems to a woman the deepest mark of degradation—and that her husband should have put it upon her was to Esther a thing so terrible, that she felt it impossible that they could ever be again on their old footing. Something told her that George would be stricken with remorse and horror at the thought that he had in his paroxysm of rage left a mark upon her skin, and would passionately kiss, and almost weep over the discolouration; but though the fact remained, and she knew that she should never as long as she lived

forget it, her pride made her spare him and herself the humiliation of his knowing it.

George had almost forgotten his anger. To do him justice he never bore malice, and his passion, as soon as it was spent, left no actively unpleasant consequences. He kissed his wife, pinched her ear, and asked her if she were cross with him still. "I met Parker outside the hotel last night," he continued, without waiting for an answer from her, "and played loo with him and two other fellows. I won fifty sovs. That was a haul, eh old woman? What should you say if I were to give you that bracelet you liked the other day at Liugi's?"

Esther looked up bewildered. Had their quarrel really passed from George's mind?—or was this his delicate way of expressing penitence?—or was it that he attached no importance to what weighed so deeply upon her?

"I know what you are thinking of," said George, who had been watching her face. "You feel that you don't deserve it after your tantrums last night. I am not sure that you do either, Mousie. Are you in a good temper this morning?—because if not I will go away again till you are."

"It was not I who was angry," said Esther in a low voice.

"You provoked me. I can't help losing my

temper ; and I hate rows—they make one deucedly hot and uncomfortable. My liver is all out of order. What right had you to turn your back upon me as though I had been so much dirt ? But I'll forgive you if you give me a kiss, and promise to be a good child for the future."

"I would rather you did not buy me the bracelet," said Esther, in a distant tone.

"Oh, very well ; I don't want to cram presents down your throat. I thought that you'd like it, and take it in good part, but I can find plenty of things to spend fifty pounds upon." He went to the window and whistled for a minute or two. "You had better write a note to Lady Lawrence this morning and tell her you weren't well last night. Do you hear, Esther ?"

"Yes," replied Esther faintly. George turned and saw that she was crying. "Mousie," he exclaimed, quickly moved at the sight of her tears, "what is the matter ? You shouldn't take things to heart so. It is unkind of you to bear malice because I got into a rage last night. I did not mean to hurt your feelings ; you should make allowances for my temper ; and you know that it was partly your fault. When a fellow has given his wife everything, and is always trying to show her how fond he is of her, it is infernal bad taste to grudge him a kiss. Come, let us

forget all about it, and do you try to be more pleasant. We'll go out by-and-by and call at the Lawrence's, that will be better than writing; and then we will go on to Liugi's and get the bracelet. I am determined that you shall have it, if it is only to show that you don't bear malice."

So the squall blew over. The husband and wife went out, and George bought Esther the bracelet, which made her shudder whenever she wore it afterwards, as though a serpent had clasped her arm.

The young couple lingered abroad all the summer, till the harvest was almost over, and the partridges at Grately nearly ready for their fate. They did Italy and Switzerland, and returned by way of the Rhine, having made a tolerably exhaustive tour, and George at least being ready to declare, with true insular prejudice, that no foreign country surpassed old England. Apart from domestic jars, Esther enjoyed her wanderings. The excitement of being whirled from one new scene to another deadened individual yearnings, and private griefs appeared less serious in the face of historical calamities. But for the absence of sympathy between herself and her husband, which every day made itself more apparent, Esther would have been loth to return to England; but as it

was, she had a longing to see him established again in his home, and a trust that his country pursuits would relieve her somewhat of the *onus* of making life pleasant to him. A companion inclined to boredom, and inclined also to resent his boredom upon the individual nearest at hand, involves at the best of times a certain amount of mental anxiety. Brand, though to outward appearance gay and good-natured, with a tendency to skim the surface of life, and to ridicule any one who in an inquiring mood attempted to sound deeper, was, like many of his temperament, frequently wretched by reason of his lack of inner resources, and absolutely dependent upon the sauce of society for imparting a zest to existence. He was decidedly coarse in his mental tone, and inclined to personal braggadocio. He had no discernment of motive or feeling in those around him, and usually accepted things and people at their lowest level. He was fond of the good things of life, would have scouted the idea of self-denial, and hated trouble and annoyance. He had a strong sense of self-importance, the keener in proportion to a lurking consciousness of intellectual inferiority, and nothing made him more angry than a suspicion of being despised. He had a fund of generous impulse, and a susceptible heart to troubles which were within the

range of his comprehension. No one would have given a five pound note more readily to an impecunious friend ; but at the same time no one would have been less disturbed by the vague consciousness—for with him it could have been nothing deeper—of a wound inflicted by a jarring allusion or gibing remark.

The close intimacy of early married life, mercilessly revealed to Esther all the salient defects of George's character, without allowing time for domestic intimacy to soften down the prominences that were displeasing, and to throw in redeeming shadows and touches of amiability that became afterwards apparent. She was not in love with George, and could not blind herself to his faults and weaknesses ; and her intense nature, craving sustenance, turned back upon itself in mournful discontent. She had every material comfort which her social status implied, and a handsome and, to all appearances, good-tempered and devoted young husband. What else could a wife desire ? But how many women there are who in their first youth have looked for a deeper source of satisfaction, and have thought themselves defrauded of their just rights, because the exact companionship they craved has been denied them.

The return to Grately seemed to Esther to

herald in a new and more active phase of existence. There was the excitement of forming plans, of re-arranging furniture, of designing definite occupations for the day, which should at least colour life with the semblance of high purpose. The old Lord's library opened out to her a vast field of enjoyment, and the historical part of the house promised ample food for her imagination, and material for schemes of restoration in the future. She thought to herself that, by-and-by, when George was less crippled in his resources than he seemed at present, and had built the new pinery and the wing to the stables about which he was always talking, she would delight her uncle by calling his antiquarian knowledge to her assistance, and together they would bring back to Elizabeth's banqueting-hall, and the historic gateway and staircase, some of their pristine splendour.

Then, though it must be admitted that her ideas were somewhat chaotic and unpractical, she planned that Mr. Lydyiard should come and stay at Grately, and should help her with his advice and co-operation, to institute reading-rooms, and perhaps courses of lectures, for the improvement of the rural population—if only George, who had no inclinations in the direction of general benevolence, would leave her unfettered, and not

be impatient with her for wishing to spend his income upon objects of which he could not see the utility, and which might threaten to interfere with his personal amusement. Esther had but a vague idea of the value of money, and did not understand why interviews with his bailiff or man of business should have the effect of depressing and irritating George, and why he sometimes made biting allusions—which she had not as yet begun to take to herself—to the folly of impecunious landowners who chose to marry wives without fortunes. Whenever such remarks caused Esther uneasiness, it was dispelled by a launch into some personal extravagance upon George's part, in which, had their resources been narrow, she could not have imagined that he would indulge.

“How pleasant this is!” said George, stretching out his legs with satisfaction, as, on the second evening after their return, and after a luxurious little *tête-à-tête* dinner, he and Esther sat together over a fire in the library which, till they should have settled down somewhat in the house, they had made their sitting-room. “There's no place like home, after all. You don't mind smoking, I suppose, Esther. As you don't seem inclined to talk, hand me the cigarettes, like a good child. I am glad we came back for the 1st. I don't

suppose the shooting will be much this year, but it gives me time to get the stable together. I don't think that I could have stood much more of that Continental mooning. You liked it, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Esther; "I liked it very much."

"Oh! well, it might have been pleasant enough to you. Women always take a kind of pride in making the grand tour—and in sentimentalizing over churches and ruins—but for me, all I can say is, that it was infernally dull." Brand's post-prandial satisfaction was beginning to take the form which Esther knew, of fault-finding as a provocative of excitement. "Companionship is everything—not that you weren't very pleasant, dear. Now we must think of filling the house as soon as it is in order. I feel as though I wanted a little fillip, and some singing, and laughing, and joking. I don't wish to hurt your feelings, Esther, and you suit me very well—but there *are* livelier women in the world than you, dear."

Esther flushed, but made no reply. She had felt happier that evening than she had done since her marriage. Her heart had expanded under the influence of George's pleasure in finding himself at home. She had been indulging in woman-like dreams of creating her joy out of his satisfaction; for no wife who feels herself appre-

ciated can be really unhappy; but his careless speech seemed to drop a black veil over all her smiling pictures of the future, and her half-formed schemes sank into nothingness.

“Why do you look' sad?” asked George presently, giving her ear a little pinch. “You can't help not being brilliant. I suppose that if one's wife is good to look at, one ought not to complain that she is mawkish. If I had wished for a talkative companion, I should have married Lina Welby. We must ask Lina to come and stay with us. She will bring a little life into the house. Don't look gloomy, Esther. Want of cheerfulness is your great fault. You should try and cultivate a more light-hearted disposition. I should be perfectly contented with you, if you would laugh occasionally, and that is not much to ask.”

“You did not think me stupid and depressing before you married me,” said Esther.

“No, dearest; men don't as a rule find their wives stupid and depressing before they *are* their wives. I don't complain that you are stupid; that is putting it too strongly; I only want you to infuse a little vivacity into your manner. What do you say to driving over to Allerton to-morrow? I should like to find out when the old boy begins his shooting. Is there any one

you can think of besides the Welbys whom we might ask for the first week? There is that young friend of yours, the girl who played—”

“I am certain that Frederica could not come,” said Esther. “I had a letter from her the other day. She is working hard at the School, and has an order for a portrait.”

“Then there’s Comyn. He was not a bad sort of fellow, though he had rather a sneering way with him which was objectionable. But he is a relation of yours, and as he can’t afford to shoot on his own account, I dare say that he will be glad of the chance of sport at another man’s expense. Shall I write to him, or will you?”

“He can always shoot at Barwold,” replied Esther; “and he is Lady Isherwood’s cousin, and no relation of mine. Do not ask him here; he would not come.”

“Why should he object to come?” asked Brand, in a surprised voice. “I thought he was sweet upon your friend, Miss Talmadge. I believe now that it was you. But you liked me best; wasn’t that it?”

Esther moved abruptly to the window. The shutters were not closed, though there was a fire in the room.

“You liked me best,” repeated George, with light complacency. He came to her side as she

was straining with her eyes into the night, and threw his arm round her waist. It was all that Esther could do to control the shuddering which seized her.

“Why don’t you shut the window if you are cold?” asked George, closing the sash with his other hand. Esther had thrown it open with a stifled longing for air and space. “I did not think that Comyn would have been so sentimental,” continued George; “but if you think he would dislike coming here, we won’t ask him. Of course, you liked me best. It would be strange if you had not done so, eh, Mousie? You would have been a greater fool than I take you to be, if you had preferred him. See what I have given you. People say that this is the finest place in the county; there would be none to come up to it if I could afford to keep it up in the way I should like. What has Bernard Comyn?—a paltry eight or nine hundred a year.”

“Oh, pray, don’t speak in that way,” cried Esther, desperately. “What is the use of talking like that? What does it matter? What does money matter?”

“It matters a great deal,” said George; “but you take things so deucedly coolly—just as though you had been born a millionaire. A wife is an expensive luxury, as I have found out. What do

you suppose our honeymoon trip cost us ? You must be economical in your housekeeping, Esther. I begin to think that Lina was right, and that we shall find my income won't go very far here."

When George had completed his household arrangements, had replenished his stud for the winter's hunting, and had paid some outstanding debts, he began to feel more forcibly than ever the truth of Lina Welby's caution. His income did not go far in the maintenance of such an establishment as that of Grately, and in the satisfaction of its master's requirements, when it was an understood thing that George was not to be stinted in one of the luxuries that had appertained to his bachelorhood, or denied anything which he coveted. Had not the house been filled by relays of visitors, George would have been seriously perplexed by the difficulties that he met with, in the adjustment of his desires to his means ; but, as it was, he had very little time for reflection or irritation.

Sir Emilius and Lady Isherwood came to Grately for a week at the commencement of the shooting season. The Welbys were also of the party. Lina was in high spirits after a brilliant campaign in London, and piqued George somewhat by the small effect his marriage appeared to have had upon her gaiety. She looked

prettier than ever upon the evening of their arrival, and he felt inclined inwardly to reverse his verdict upon the inferiority of pocket Venuses. She wore a filmy white gown with crimson flowers in her breast, which set off her piquant little face. George looked at her admiringly, and turned with a qualm of dissatisfaction towards his own young wife, who was sitting between Lady Isherwood and Mrs. Welby, listening, in her most dreamy fashion, to what they were saying. Lina beckoned him across the room, and made a place for him by her side.

"You are looking very well, Lina," said George; "I never saw you in better form."

"I am in—very excellent form. Dear boy, I am not a racehorse. The truth is, I had a very jolly time in London this year."

"No end of admirers, I suppose."

"Oh, my dear boy, that goes without saying. Seriously, I am thinking of following your example. It isn't nice to be left out in the cold; is it, George?"

"I think that a fellow often feels himself out in the cold when he is married," said George, discontentedly.

"He ought to be as warm as a young turtle dove tucked under its mother's wing; but I want to know what is the matter with you. You look

as disconsolate as though all earthly joys had departed from you. Surely this is not the result I am to expect from matrimony. Are you bored with me ? ”

“No,” answered George, with a sickly smile.

“Has Esther, sweet woman, been scolding you ? ”

“No.”

“Dearest boy, *is* your liver out of order ? ”

“I don’t know ; I daresay it is. The truth is, Lina, I am utterly wretched.”

“Gracious ! This is nice talk for a young husband ; but it’s your internal economy. I know all about it. Darling boy, take comfort. You men are all the same ; old Jane Pettit—one of my old women, you know—said to me yesterday —‘I’m right down thankful you’ve come, Miss Lina, to cheer John up a bit, for his liver’s that bad he don’t give me no peace.’ You are put out with the world in general, George ; and you are cross with me. You would like to see me pale and disconsolate, with a willow garland round my head, instead of these too delicious red things. Isn’t it so now ? ”

“Well, when a fellow has liked a girl tremendously, it is hard upon him when he sees that she does not care two straws for him.”

“I care a great deal more than two straws

about you ; I always did—but you liked some one else better. Merciful Providence !” as Dr. Lightner says, “far be it from me to quarrel with Thy decrees. Did I not tell you last time I was here that my destiny lay in the Church ?”

“You don’t mean to insinuate that you have been caught by a parson ?”

“That isn’t a nice way of putting it. You should at least give me the credit of catching the parson.”

“Some beastly High Church curate that you have been making a fool of.”

“No, dear boy ; nothing short of lawn sleeves.”

“You don’t really mean it, Lina,” said George, excitedly.

“Hush!! Esther is looking towards us. You must not make your wife jealous.”

“I wish that she would be jealous sometimes. It would at least vary matrimonial monotony.”

“Sweet-dreamy child ! I wish I did not admire her so awfully. I am always longing to be like her. She is coming this way. I know what she wants ; it is not to scold you, George. I promised to sing when the men came in. Yes, you nice comforting person, I’ll do anything to amuse you ; I know what you have been going through. Now, dearest Esther, I must really tell you and dear Lady Isherwood of a delightful discovery I

made in London. At Parkins and Gotto's, dear Lady Isherwood, such a charming book for house-keeping accounts—with a suitable text for each article of domestic consumption. What a proof of practical Christianity to have compiled such a work !”

George burst out laughing at Miss Welby's mimicry of her mother, and Lina sat down to the piano and sang some sparkling airs out of a new comic opera that had appeared while the Brands were abroad. Esther left them with the conviction that they would find most amusement in a *tête-à-tête*, and George remained by Lina's side till the party broke up. They talked animatedly the whole evening ; she running her fingers over the keys while she looked archly into his face, and chattered in her rippling staccato that always had the effect of amusing him.

To do Lina justice she never meant to be ill-natured ; and though admiration was food and drink to her, she would not have indulged her appetite in any particular direction had it been forcibly represented to her that thereby she made a brother to offend, or caused a sister pain ; but it was her way to skim lightly the froth of emotion—and there really was a Bishop in the question.

CHAPTER III.

DISSATISFACTION.

DURING the week that the Welbys spent at Grately, George sought Lina's society with an eagerness that he had never shown in the days when it had been a matter of course that he should pay her attention. She imparted a zest to her companionship by alternately teasing, piquing, and flattering him by a more or less jesting avowal of preference, and was in every respect a marked contrast to his wife, whom, much as he admired her, he occasionally found insipid. Nice titillation of his faculties of enjoyment was somewhat of a necessity to George, and apart from the interest of conjugal fellowship, the greatest excitement to be derived from intercourse with Esther was in playing upon her sensibilities, pulling, as it were, the strings of her emotions for his entertainment, and watching, with the rough amusement of a school-boy, the effect of a tactless observation or jarring allusion

upon her sensitive temperament. It was like the perverse pleasure which a child finds in running his fingers over the keys of a finely tuned piano ; but when the performer has no ear to distinguish harmony from discord, that enjoyment soon palls.

Esther had no objective powers of pleasing. She was like a responsive instrument, which is entirely dependent upon the hand that touches it. With Lina Welby the case was different. She had the knack of individualizing outside things, and was always able to flavour commonplace conversation with a dash of originality or a spice of comicality, and to amuse her hearers with a ready flow of talk, which though neither piquant nor brilliant in itself, sounded so from her rosy lips.

It must not be supposed that George's enthusiasm for Esther had dwindled into indifference already. He still admired her above all other women ; and if his passion had cooled slightly, it had given place to a tenderness which might in time develop into a calm, reliable affection ; but they had neither of them arrived anywhere near the point of mutual understanding. Her cold purity rebuffed his warmth, and it was a source of dissatisfaction to him that she took no pains to trick herself in smiles, or make herself alluring to him ; nor did she, in his estimation,

show that proper appreciation of himself and of the advantages he had bestowed upon her, which he considered becoming in the wife to whom he had been so generous.

There were other things, too, in his married life that galled him. Money was not so plentiful with him as it had been in his bachelor days. There had been his settlement upon Esther, and the house had been partially refurnished, for the old Lord had spent the latter part of his life in four rooms, and there were alterations in the stables necessary according to Brand's advanced ideas of luxury. When the bailiff of the estate eyed disapprovingly the home improvements, and the increased stud, and talked grimly of farms thrown up, of land that needed to be drained, and of repairs to outlying properties, for which dissatisfied tenants were clamouring, and when the consideration of scanty harvests and agricultural depression was urged upon him by this solicitor as a curb to extravagance, George felt inclined to blame Esther for the crippling of his resources, and more than once caught himself reflecting that had he done what had been obviously expected of him, and married his cousin Lina, money embarrassments need not have disturbed the luxurious ease in which he wished to lap himself. Then, too, it vexed him that the society of

Woodfordshire did not make so much of him as when he had been single and a possible suitor for her daughters; and he began to ask himself a little discontentedly whether he had not after all paid too dearly for the possession he had at one time coveted so ardently. George was one of those men between whose teeth the apples crumble quickly into ashes, and to whom a good relinquished becomes, from the moment of its abandonment, the most desirable thing in the universe. When Mr. Thompson his lawyer, a privileged old friend of the family, said to him after a long and somewhat disheartening discussion of his affairs, "It is a pity, sir, that you did not take money a little into consideration when you married," George, though he silenced with apparent displeasure any disparaging allusion to his choice, soliloquized afterwards regretfully—"I believe that Thompson is right, and that I have been a fool. One woman is as good as another after six months of matrimony."

George did not possess the amiable faculty of concealing his thoughts, or stifling his regrets in his own bosom. They showed themselves in a hundred different ways; and though he never expressed open dissatisfaction—when he was alone with Lina, it clothed itself in vague confidences sufficiently explicit to tickle her vanity, and

give her the clue to his thoughts, but not definite enough to require explanation, rebuke, or avoidance of *tête-à-têtes*.

The ordinary course of young ladyhood was monotonous, and needed a fillip. Lina's London season had been exciting, and country-house visiting later on had resulted in the captivation of the lately installed Bishop of Woodchester. But reaction had set in. His new duties had called the Bishop to active employment in his diocese, just when affairs were approaching a climax, and life was flat enough to require stimulation of the kind produced by a cousinly flirtation, which was not likely to have detrimental consequences. Lina only wanted to amuse herself; she meant no harm, and would have been horrified at the suggestion of treachery to Esther.

The partridges had a rest for a little while after the Welbys' departure, and Esther and George were for a short time alone at Grately. The first two evenings of their *tête-à-tête* George came down in slippers, stretched himself upon the sofa after dinner, fondled his wife, and declared that nothing was wanting to complete his happiness. There was a conscious pricking at his heart when he thought of his late attentions and confidences to Lina, and he was just in the mood for half-confession and endearment.

"After all, Mousie, a man ought not to regret being married," he said, complacently stroking Esther's hand as she sat near him in the library. "It is uncommonly jolly getting back to this room, and out of our stiff company ways; I am not at all sure that we are not happier and more comfortable alone. What do you think?"

"I should be quite happy, George," said Esther—upon whom her husband's speech, as implying former doubt upon the subject, had grated more than he was aware—"if I thought that you were always contented with me."

"Oh! I can put up with you very well," replied George, in a jocose manner that was meant to be flattering. "You do me very nicely, my dear; and I thought, considering all things, that you made a very good hostess; but you must be a little more lively in society. Let us try to be sufficient to each other. There is no doubt a man gives up a good deal when he marries; but there is no reason why a wife should not indemnify him for the loss of bachelor amusements. Now, if I had only had myself to think of, I should probably have run up to town this afternoon, and should be dining with some fellows at the Club, and doing a theatre afterwards. They are putting on all the new pieces at this time of year."

"I wish that you had not thought of me," said Esther; "I should not have minded in the least being alone."

"Another time you might come up with me, or stay at Barwold for a night or two; but I could not have gone to-day. Thompson has sent me a message that he wants to see me to-morrow about some confounded business. I suppose it will be the old story—retrenchment. I wish, Esther, that to your other charms you could have added that of a fortune."

"You knew that I had nothing when you married me," said Esther coldly.

"Of course, dear, it is not your fault. I'm not complaining. No," he went on with virtuous resolution; "I mean to settle down into a domestic character, and to find my happiness in the society of my wife. But somehow," he added, with reflective candour, "we never seem to have much to say to each other. Now I can rattle on with Lina by the hour together."

It was very true. They never had much to say to each other. They had not been married long enough for their minds to have been brought into approximation by external and domestic interests, and upon abstract subjects they had absolutely no meeting ground. It is from this imperfect assimilation of tastes and

associations that the trials of early married life usually arise. If the first five years pass without open rupture disunion seldom occurs later. Children are born and grow up, binding parents into a closer accord. Domestic and social cares promote a communion of thought which at first appeared impossible. But the young wife who has just become conscious of the blankness of spiritual intercourse between her husband and herself, finds it difficult to see the future in hopeful colours.

Esther tried to answer George cheerfully, but there was a sense of effort, of acting up to a part, which struck like a chill at her heart. It was not that she felt speech necessary to mutual understanding, for how often had silence seemed to her more eloquent than words! When she and Bernard had sat together in the dusk, verbal intercourse had not been needed to assure them of reciprocal joy in each other's society. As she sat now on a low stool by George's sofa with her hand in his, the question rose in her mind of how it would have been with her had Bernard occupied her husband's place. But a startling sense of moral guiltiness followed upon the thought, and she cast it from her as far as she was able. "George," she exclaimed, "why should we have little to say to each other?

There must be a great deal to think of in the management of an estate, and though I am very ignorant I would try to help you, if you would let me. I have been thinking—wishing to plan some new cottages—they are wanted, I know, very badly. Everything that interested you should interest me too, even if it were only the shooting and hunting. I would try to care for all your amusements. But there are other things. I drove through Degley the other day”—Degley was a small village partly belonging to George, which lay on the outskirts of the Grately estate —“and everything looked so wretched and poverty-stricken. I should like to go among the poor people and do them good. We ought not to live entirely to ourselves or to society, and I am sure there is no lack of work here.”

“Degley is a notoriously immoral place,” said George, “and it is not fit for you to go about there. Ask Eyre about the poor people. They are all in the parson’s line, but not much in mine. There is always enough to do in the management of an estate to make both ends meet, and to keep the tenants from clamouring for things one can’t give them. It is all a confounded bore. There’ll be the game to get up, for the preserves have been going to the devil, and Gardiner says it is because old Welby makes such a —— row if there

are not foxes. The two things can be managed, I am certain, if the keeper will take the trouble. I wish, Esther, that you would enter the number of game that has been shot. If you want something to do you might do that; the lists are in my note-book in the smoking-room. I forgot to put down yesterday's bag. Fifteen brace of partridges and twelve hares; can you remember that? No, don't go; it will do by-and-by."

George closed his eyes, and presently there was a gentle snore which told Esther that he was asleep. She took up a novel and began to read, but her mind would not glide with the book, and she fell to thinking instead. To-morrow she would go to Degley, and visit some of the cottages. There must be a means of escape from the caged feeling, which, as she sat by her sleeping husband, seemed to creep over her and stultify all her energies. Could she never get away from this cramping personality? There was a bald hiatus in the inner lives of them both. She did not satisfy George—she could see it in his manner. Every one of his words and gestures betrayed to her quickened perception a discontent with his marriage, of which he himself seemed barely conscious. If he were disappointed in her, where then lay her motive for endeavour? Her married life without love was nothing but a degrading

prostitution from which she could not escape. She was eating of his food, living at his expense, clothed in garments for which he paid. It was impossible for her to reimburse him—not even in the way for which he had bargained. She could not amuse him, or make life enjoyable to him. She must always be a drag upon his pleasures. There must, till her life's end, remain the consciousness of debt and dependence, against which all her womanhood rose in revolt.

It seemed to Esther that she had been stranded helpless upon a foreign shore. Marriage was not what she had expected. Its higher meaning had been crushed under the weight of material obligations that were hateful to her. It was all distasteful—lowering. Every day she laid down her best and purest instincts to be trampled on by a pleasant, practical epicurism.

As she looked at her husband's handsome, sensuous face, with its smiling lips, and nostrils dilated in slumber, she felt herself inwardly recoiling from him. The book upon her lap dropped on to the floor. Just then the butler entered with his tray and George awoke, stirred, and stared a little crossly around him as he sweetened his coffee, and poured into it the liqueur glass of brandy that the man handed him.

“I'll drink the lighter claret another evening,

Curtis," said George. "Why did you let me fall asleep?" he said petulantly to Esther, when the butler had left the room. "I hate going to sleep after dinner; it makes one so heavy and stupid. You should have talked to me, and kept me awake. That is because we are alone, and there is no music or talking to stir one up. I wish you were anything of a hand at billiards, Esther, that would be something. Let us have old Erne to-morrow evening; he isn't lively, but at all events he can play *ecarté*. Hand me over the *Field*, like a good child; perhaps that will help me to keep awake."

Mr. Eyre, the clergyman of the parish, dined with them the following evening, and he and George played *ecarté*, while Esther stitched at her embroidery, and mentally planned the rebuilding of some cottages upon the estate, the dilapidation and wretched accommodation of which had troubled her that day. She had gone to Degley, as she had proposed, to make acquaintance with some of the poor people, and had been shocked at finding a father and mother and grown up sons and daughters sleeping together in one small chamber; still more shocked to discover that such breaches of decorum, and worse breaches of morality, were a common thing in the village, where the cottages were all tumbling down, and

let easily on account of the lowness of their rent.

This immorality of which George had spoken so lightly, might surely be laid to their account if they suffered the present state of things to continue. Esther, as she sat silently stitching, worked herself up into a fervour about the duties of landlords towards their poorer tenants.

George must pull down these cottages and build others, she said to herself; no matter what luxury they denied themselves it was clearly incumbent upon them to do something for the people at Degley. She had no opportunity of speaking to her husband till the following morning, and then she attacked him with an ill-judged enthusiasm.

"And where is the money to spring from?" asked George, when she had excitedly unfolded her scheme. "Have you a private fund of your own that you can draw upon for these good works?"

Esther flushed. "You know that I have no money; but I thought that you would see at once how desirable it is that these poor people should be better housed."

"Not I," answered George; "they like pigging it. Degley has always been an ill-favoured place, and why should I do what my uncle, who was

ten times richer than I am, did not think necessary? I have enough to spend my income upon, without building new cottages at your pleasure for a thankless set of paupers and poachers."

"Oh, George, they are not all like that. I went into one house yesterday, and the old mother talked to me with tears about the state of things. Her daughter had had a child; it is too dreadful to think of. I am told that immorality is quite common; and it is because they are huddled up together in that way. Surely we must be in part to blame for these people's wickedness."

George laughed a little coarsely. "You women always take the sentimental view of what you call immorality. The lower classes think nothing of that sort of thing; and the old woman would probably have introduced you to her grandchild without a blush if you had not put notions into her head."

"Will you go to Degley yourself, George, and see how things are?"

"Not I—I should be mobbed. The people can go on pigging it. Carter (the bailiff) spoke to me about the place the other day, and I told him it might go to the deuce—as far as building was concerned. You had better not visit Degley again. Everything goes wrong with me," continued George discontentedly. "Wills has sent

in this morning to say that the grey horse I gave two hundred guineas for the other day has strained its sinews, and Thompson has written to me about the overdrawing of my account; but these things don't matter to you. You think more of a two-penny half-penny cottage than of my embarrassments.

"That is unjust," said Esther, with warmth. "You do not tell me of your embarrassments. You set me apart when I wish to be near you and to help you. I will give up anything or do anything you wish; but you have bought so many horses lately that I could not think you were really in want of money."

"You would like me to be mounted like a beggar," said George, with childish unreasonableness.

Esther waited till he had finished grumbling, and then continued: "I told some of the people I went to see yesterday, that I would speak to you. Their name is Sharpe, and the mother is bed-ridden; there is a large family. If you did not do anything for the rest, perhaps you could give them a better cottage."

"Send them soup and blankets, if you like, or let them go to the parish. The workhouse is the best place for bed-ridden women. I shall certainly not give them a better cottage for

nothing. If they want one, let them pay the rent of one."

"The father has been out of work for some time," pleaded Esther, "and the sons are mere labourers. They say they cannot pay more. I promised to try and do something. I cannot go near them again unless I have good news for them. Could we not lower the rent of one of the better cottages?"

"The whole village would complain, and I should be obliged to do the same for all. I suppose you don't want me to suffer."

"We need not spend so much, George. Let us do with a hunter or even a servant less."

"Don't talk rot," said George. "I am not going to reduce my establishment, or appear shabbily in the hunting field, for the sake of sentimental humbug. I tell you I can't do anything on the estate now. I am pushed for money as it is; and just when it is important that I should make a good impression in the county. It is always at first that one takes up one's standing, and the shabby way my uncle treated me set all the people talking. A little show and entertaining goes a long way. By Jove! if I had known the expenditure that marriage would involve I would have taken care that I did not choose a pauper."

“It is unfortunate,” said Esther, deeply hurt, “that you did not think of that a year ago.”

“There is no use in thinking of it now,” said George, “unless you can save me expense, instead of adding to it. I have only myself to blame. As I was truly told, ‘A man may sometimes find that he has paid too dearly for a thing he has fancied.’”

Esther’s heart swelled with resentment. With whom had he dared to discuss her in such coarse terms? Did he mean that he had “fancied” her, had bought her, and now felt that he had paid too dearly for his possession? Had he looked upon her as a slave exhibited in the market-place for him to take or leave as he thought fit? All the outraged pride of her womanhood rose up against him in the keenest hatred and repulsion. She looked at him for a moment as though she could have struck him, and then left him, hurrying to her boudoir and locking the door behind her.

George felt some qualms of compunction when he saw how deeply his words had wounded Esther. They had fallen from him unawares, and the coarse reasoning had been so patent to him that he had not calculated the effect it would have upon her. He comforted himself, however, with the reflection that the hurt could

only be skin-deep, that a few tender words would heal it, and that in the abstract, it did people good to be "taken down." This levelling view of the outer world, with himself as master paramount of his immediate circle, was characteristic of George's idiosyncrasy. Esther, he reasoned, saw things from too sentimental a standpoint; a little dose of actuality would bring life before her into a practical focus. There was a lurking feeling that she despised him, which kindled animosity in George's mind, and made him glad that she should be humbled. She never seemed to realize sufficiently all that he had done for her in marrying her, or to feel that it was her duty to be grateful and submissive to him as her benefactor. Why, it was only the other day that she had been living upon an uncivilized island, obliged to do the most menial work, and subject to the blows and caprices of a drunken father. That had not been a school to inculcate ultra-refinement of feeling. It was characteristic of George, that by a strange mental perversion of the order of events, he had brought himself to believe that Esther owed her original elevation in the social scale entirely to his agency, whereas he had in fact had nothing to do with it. It was ridiculous, he said to himself, for Esther to make a fuss about the Degley cottages; but as for these people in whom she was inter-

ested, he would find out who they were, and if it were merely a matter of five pounds or so, they should have a better domicile. Innovations which trenched upon his personal expenditure must be checked, but his impulses were, on the whole, charitable.

He was called out just then to speak to his bailiff, and while the matter was in his mind he bade the man inquire into it, and do what was desirable—thinking to himself that when Esther should see that he had done what she wished, she would be properly struck by his disinterested generosity. Carter was, however, against the whole thing; found out that the man was a poacher; and did not act upon his master's suggestion, ready with a string of reasons, in the event of questions being asked. George, having, as he thought, settled the question in this lordly, off-hand way, thought no more about the matter, or if he did, suffered the good intention to do duty for a charitable action.

Esther knowing nothing of what had passed through his mind, avoided Degley, and made no further allusion to the subject. The individual wound had swallowed up the impersonal interest. George had hurt her in her tenderest point, and the sore, like that first bruise, rankled for long. Her passion cooled, but left behind it a despairing

bitterness. She fancied that she had at last made herself certain that her husband regretted deeply having married her, and she settled despondingly in her mind that there was nothing now but for them to drift further apart till their union became but a name. What hope was there that the future would bring them nearer to each other? She would do her duty as his wife, but all joy in that duty must go from her. The iron had entered into her soul.

Poor Esther had none of that analytical faculty which teaches us to accept the world—apart from our individual valuation—at its best worth. She could not suppress her own consciousness, and take up the threads of existence at the point where they became woven into the lives of others. Her sensibilities were pent up in a well of egotism. She could not turn her mistaken marriage into a motive force, which should divert her sympathies and interests, and send them flowing into the wide stream of humanity. We can none of us teach; our best efforts are but faint cries from out of our shallow experiences, as we mingle them with the experience of others, but it is in the sharing of pain that our deepest influence is found. Esther might, years later, appreciate this philosophy, but now she seemed too weighed down by her own struggling

individuality to find any satisfaction in the contemplation of life from an impersonal standpoint. Her marriage had upon her the effect of a slow moral suicide. Balzac has written : " Les drames de la vie ne sont pas dans les circonstances ; ils sont dans les sentiments ; ils sont dans le cœur." The deepest tragedies of life lie beneath its surface, and the gradual extinction of hope, and deadening of spiritual interest and activity, is frequently sadder to contemplate than the violent sundering of the links of happiness by some unforeseen and imperious calamity.

CHAPTER IV.

BERNARD CALLS AT MAGENTA TERRACE.

BERNARD was more fortunate than Esther, in that he had a definite occupation to fill his thoughts and absorb his energies. Immediately after his disappointment he had resolutely turned his activity upon a work for which his German studies had prepared him, and which, nearly a year after Esther's engagement, had just issued from the press.

He had thrown himself with enthusiasm into its composition, and had launched it with full confidence in its success; but though it had created somewhat of a sensation, its influence upon the thinking part of society had not been altogether what he had hoped. He had made the mistake common to immature writers upon speculative and quasi-scientific matters, of going beyond the range of individual observation, and of dealing with his subject in a dogmatic manner

that his years and experience did not warrant. Bernard was ambitious and hasty in his conclusions, and eager to cram down the public throat theories in advance of his age, and crude enough to provoke adverse criticism and even ridicule from the pens of more practised writers than himself.

A young writer, unless he be one of those meteoric geniuses who take admiration by storm, must creep unobtrusively into public notice or submit to comparative failure. Cup and saucer platitudes are more to the general mind than subtle analysis, or the presentation of metaphysical problems in the ponderous guise of philosophical dissertation. Unless backed by a profundity of reasoning that defies criticism, or charged with a flippant brilliancy that appeals to the sensational appetite of the day, such a work must inevitably fall flat and unappreciated. Many of Bernard's ideas were bold and original, but they were unlearnedly and pedantically expressed. The work had been laborious, and bore signs of travail. Bernard had erred in estimating his own powers too highly, and there was a self-assertion in his conclusions that impressed unfavourably and challenged criticism. Upon the whole, the book if not quite a failure was the next thing to one, and Bernard's pride writhed

under the mortification. He had meant to do so much ; and instead of reaping a harvest of commendation, only disappointment had as yet fallen to his share. He could have borne better to have been entirely crushed than to have been awarded stinted praise. At the same time a dogged obstinacy was aroused in him, a determination to discover the reason of non-success ; and could he but have recognized it as such, discomfiture was his best discipline. In truth, he was passing through much the same phase of experience as that which would by-and-by furnish Esther with the clue to contentment, but at present he chafed, was moody and bitter, and took pessimist views of human nature.

Things were in this state with him when he received the following note from Lady Isherwood :

“ *Barwold, December 11th.*

“ MY DEAR BERNARD,

“ Leonie has just sent me home a lovely dinner costume, a combination of colours which she tells me has come direct from Worth—the loveliest shade of *pain brûlé* satin mixed with rose, trimmed with bouquets of fuchsia blossoms round the tablier and on the corsage. Please remember that the fuchsia is the *Longiflora*, as it

is important that everything should be in keeping, and the flowers have come straight from the manufactory in Paris, and are perfect imitations of nature.

“I have lost Frederica Talmadge’s address, or I would write to her direct, as I know that such things are *not in your line*; but as I do not often ask you to do anything for me, and you are certain to see her, I will entrust you with my commission. I want a fan painted to correspond with the costume; the material must be *pain brûlé* satin, of which I enclose a pattern, and the design in fuchsias to match those on the dress. Please see about it *at once*, as I particularly wish to wear the costume at Lady Allerton’s dinner on the 30th. I am sure that you can have nothing particular to do now that your book is out. Emilius says that you had better run down for some shooting. You will be pleased to hear that the *Ladies’ Authority*, which I have begun to take in, speaks flatteringly of your book. I should like to read it if you will send down a copy; it is so stupid not to know anything about it when people ask one questions; but I am afraid that you don’t think much of women’s opinions. I should think Wills would have a fuchsia in bloom of the kind I mentioned, which Frederica could copy.

“It is very dull here, and I am thinking of

engaging a companion. If you heard of any one likely to suit me you might let me know. It was most inconsiderate and ungrateful of Esther to marry just when she was getting into my ways, and after we had educated and made her presentable, for of course she was a perfect savage when she first came to England. We stayed a week at Grately in October. Esther was looking well, though a little thin, and had brought some lovely gowns from Paris.

“Believe me, dear Bernard,

“Your affectionate Cousin,

“HERMIONE ISHERWOOD.”

“Oh Lord!” groaned Bernard, “this is what women come to. I had better give the order at once, or I shall have no peace.”

He walked down to South Kensington, stopping at Wills’, and purchasing a fuchsia of the kind Hermione had named, which he ordered to be sent to Magenta Terrace. Then he turned into Gloucester Road, and at last knocked at the mean little door set between its miniature bow-windows, and area-railings.

It was a half-holiday at the School of Art, and Frederica was taking advantage of the short winter’s daylight to get on with some Christmas cards she was painting. The fashion of sending

such pretty greetings, which has come so much into vogue of late years, was to her a small source of revenue, and meant in the present instance, the gift of a fur-lined cloak for Aunt Theodosia, to replace the time-worn, imitation sealskin. The little Abigail, slightly grimy, though a shade taller and tidier than the original occupant of Miss Talmadge's kitchen, opened the door, and ushered Bernard downstairs into the little brown parlour where Frederica was sitting.

Bernard's mind had been during the last six months so full of other absorbing interests, that he had almost forgotten Frederica; or if he had thought of her, it had been with that vague, pleasurable regret, unaccompanied by keen desire, which one mentally associates with a congenial companion, who has brightened some period of our lives, but from whom circumstances have combined to separate us.

It had been far otherwise with Frederica. During the year that had passed since her visit to Barwold she had gone over in memory, not once but a thousand times, every conversation that had ever taken place between them. She had played softly in the twilight the pieces of music that she connected with him, and had lingered lovingly over the books they had discussed together. Of course, she had read his own,

and though she had but vaguely understood his involved sentences, had tried to discover in them an esoteric meaning unapparent to the multitude. She had drawn innumerable portraits of him, which she had sedulously concealed from every eye but her own ; and had, in short, raised him upon a gilded pedestal as the divinity of her girlish existence. But she was full of maiden modesty over her secret, and to have allowed Bernard or any other to perceive her worship would have seemed to her utter shame and degradation. It had a deeper meaning than most young attachments. He had unconsciously touched in her being the spring of inspiration, and it was to him that she owed her recognition of something higher in her profession than anything she had before seen in it—the presence of an ideal to be striven after, that was becoming visible in her painting. He had not talked to her of Art, but he had unknowingly imported the poetic element into her life.

She was thinking of him at the moment that his knock sounded at the door. Aunt Theodosia was in the kitchen which adjoined the brown parlour, mixing the Christmas pudding, and disturbing by her high-pitched monologue the harmonious flow of her niece's work and reflections. Her voice was plainly audible through

the partition, as it addressed the little maid in self-laudatory admonition or remonstrance.

“ Bless me, child, haven’t you wiped that spoon yet? When shall I ever have succeeded in teaching you the ways of a gentleman’s establishment? Do you think that Miss Frederica would eat a pudding stirred with a greasy ladle, after mingling in the county society of Woodfordshire, and partaking of dinners that would surpass your wildest imaginings? Not that I have not assisted at many a more brilliant banquet than any that was ever placed upon Sir Emilius Isherwood’s table. Now the nutmeg—and watch what I am doing, child. You will never have a better opportunity of learning to do things in a masterly style than by studying me. There are very few poor butcher’s drudges that have the privilege of being taught cookery by a Glencairne. There—you may taste a little mouthful. I think Miss Frederica will say that she did not eat better even at Barwold. Good, isn’t it? Didn’t I tell you it would be good? Your last missis did not know how to make plum-puddings. I am not surprised at that. It is only a great mind that can adapt itself gracefully to domestic avocations. Blood will show itself, even in the stoning of raisins. Give me the rum. There’s nothing like a dash of Jamaica for imparting a

flavour to a pudding; bear that in mind, child. Birth cannot be ennobled by wealth, but it may ennoble poverty, as Lady Susan—Good Lord! why do you stand staring at me like a gaby? Don't you see that the milk for the custard is boiling over—a good sixpennorth ruined. There, get out of my sight, idiot that you are! Hand *me* the saucepan."

"Aunt Theodosia," called Frederica from the next room. "There is a knock at the street door."

"At the front door! Bless the child, and I have not got on my front. If it is Mrs. Beasley, my love, just cough loudly, and I'll come out as I am. As finished a lady as ever breathed in the three kingdoms, but reduced, through a bad husband, to doing her own washing. Go and open the door, Eliza, and show the lady into the drawing—stay, there's no fire laid upstairs—no, into the parlour."

Bernard was admitted into Frederica's presence.

"It's not a lady, 'm; it's a gentleman," said the little maid, returning with her fingers in her mouth.

Miss Talmadge applied her ear to the partition, and satisfied herself as to the personality of her visitor. The little maid had expected that her

mistress would instantly fly upstairs and don the curls and the cap ; but no—Aunt Theodosia stood silent and ruminative for the space of two minutes. “ There’s no knowing what may come of it,” she said softly to herself. “ There was Lizzie Frazer, the governess, that married Sir Arthur Haffenden, and Frederica, bless her, is a Glencairne all over. She has just the same dolly figure that I had when I was young, only not so *spirituelle*. Hand me the pudding-cloth, child ; and when the pot is on the fire come upstairs and I’ll give you out the silver salver, and a decanter of sherry to take into the parlour before the gentleman leaves. That gentleman is a friend of Miss Frederica’s, child, a cousin of Lady Isherwood’s, and has always been accustomed to have things set before him in the highest style ; so put on a clean apron, and brush your hair before you come in with the wine. There is no knowing what may come of it,” Miss Talmadge went on below her breath ; “ one never can tell what Providence has ordained. Frederica is a Glencairne ; and a pedigree is not to be despised.”

This reflection imparted an additional dignity to Miss Talmadge’s demeanour, as she took the salver with the Glencairne arms in the centre from its wrappings of silver paper, and decanted a bottle of the late Colonel’s sherry. Alas !

there was but one remaining. Then she went into the drawing-room, and took from a book-bracket on the little table by her best arm-chair a sacred red volume much interleaved, and carried it with her to her own bedroom when she went to dress. "He shall see," she said in an undertone while she combed out her front. "He shall see that the Talmadges are lineally descended from the Earls of Glencairne. It will be impossible for him to doubt the evidence of the peerage and of his own eyesight—and blood will tell—" Then she shook out her dress, and adjusted her curls with a solemn appearance of responsibility that was not usual with her.

Downstairs Frederica stood blushing before Bernard, as he held her hand.

"I am so glad to see you again," he said, warmly. "I have often thought of you, and have meant to call, but I have been much occupied of late, and now I can't claim any credit for coming. It is my cousin Hermione who has sent me."

He handed Frederica Lady Isherwood's letter, and laughed ironically as she read it.

"You see," he said. "What should I do if I had a creature like that belonging to me? Shall I send my book down to Barwold to be discussed over tea and muffins in the pauses of a council on

millinery. It is enough to make one hate the whole thing. If I had not already felt a desire to fling my book into the fire, I should long to do so now, after hearing that it has been praised by the *Ladies' Authority*. *Le Follet* will be pronouncing upon me next."

"Oh, Mr. Comyn," said Frederica, "it is beneath you to be vexed; and you must not abuse poor Lady Isherwood and the *Ladies' Authority*. Do you know that I make a little money sometimes by designing patterns for it. See what some of us have to stoop to. I have read your book," she went on, nervously; "of course I am too ignorant to say anything—I am only a woman—a representative of the *Ladies' Authority*, but I cannot tell you how much I liked it—even when I did not quite understand it. It seemed to me so truly great. I kept an article about it which I read not long ago, and have wished to send you—but I did not like to do so."

"You are very good," said Bernard, scornful, and yet interested. "I daresay that I have seen it too, and if not, perhaps it would be kinder not to show it me."

"You shall judge," said Frederica, unlocking with a key upon her watch-chain a little desk upon a side-table, and taking from it a bundle of loose papers neatly pinned together.

"Another woman's verdict upon my poor volume," said Bernard.

"I don't know why you should be so bitter," said Frederica; "it seems to me that every one has said good things about your book, except those who have not understood it."

The phrase gratified Bernard. Writers who have just fallen short of the standard they hoped to reach, are pleased at the suggestion that the common herd cannot soar up to their flights; and yet he was annoyed with himself, and ashamed of his sensitiveness to praise or ridicule.

"What does it matter?" he said. "Failure ought to be no new experience to me. I should be above caring what people think of my work. Like a Spartan mother, the true artist should cheerfully give up his deformed child to immolation without the city. It is better to fail in a great purpose than to succeed in one that is less than the highest."

"That is true; that is noble," said Frederica, softly. "Ah! you and I understand. It is not for success that one works; but for the religion of excellence." She looked at Bernard as she spoke with an enthusiasm in her face which he had never seen kindled in it before. Was the artist speaking unconsciously through her girl's lips? Her eyes drooped before his. "Every one must

care though," she said, in a lowered tone; "one would not be human if one did not."

He took the slip of paper from her hand and read it through. The article was from a well-known journal of literary weight, and had the signature of an authority in letters. Strangely enough, Bernard had missed reading it, and it spoke volumes for Frederica's tact that she had singled out this review to show him. It was of the kind most soothing to an author whose confidence in his own powers has been shaken. The praise was judicious, and awarded only where it was manifestly due; the criticism delicate and discriminating, and the disapprobation calculated to stimulate further effort. Bernard put the paper down, feeling warmed and comforted. There rose in his heart quite a new tenderness and admiration for Frederica, and he wondered why he had not come to her sooner. Here was indeed a pearl among women — modest, appreciative, talented, and full of noble fellowship.

"You have kept all these," he said, pointing to the bundle of newspaper extracts. "Were you really so interested in my work? It was very kind of you, Frederica."

The Christian name fell from his lips unawares, but it dropped like elixir upon Frederica's heart, vivifying every fibre of emotion.

“Why are not all women like you?” continued Bernard, with an emphasis that was almost passionate. “Men would be different—life would be different if they were. Are those Christmas cards that you are painting? I don’t suppose that any one will care sufficiently about me to send me such a greeting. I wonder if it would be asking too much—if you would give me one of those that you have painted?”

“If you would like it,” faltered Frederica, selecting the one which she thought the most worthy, and giving it to him. “A merry Christmas, Mr. Comyn, and a happy new year.”

“Thank you; I shall value this little picture very much. What work have you been doing lately?” he added abruptly. “Are you getting on well?”

“I have had three orders for portraits since I have been at home,” replied Frederica. “My patrons do not belong to the great world; one is our greengrocer, Mr. Raikes, who is anxious to form a family gallery; and another is a friend of Aunt Theodosia’s, Mr. Comyn, a lady of independent means, who has given me five pounds for my work, but—every one begins—I may arrive at something higher in time.”

“You will succeed,” said Bernard. “There are some people modest, unobtrusive, patient,

who always do what they wish. You are one of these I am certain. You will gain your heart's desire, whatever it may be."

Frederica blushed again, and her heart throbbed with joyful excitement as she listened to his concluding words. Did he guess its innermost desire?—and was his assurance an omen that it would be granted? She turned away, fearful of betraying herself.

"Mr. Comyn," she said, with her face averted, "it is a very long time since we have seen you, and I thought that you had perhaps forgotten us. I hope that you will come again. Aunt Theodosia would be glad—that is, if you are not going away."

"I have no intention of leaving London," said Bernard, "and I will come again certainly. It is kind of you not to punish me for my negligence, and to ask me. We must try some duets together again. I have often thought of you, and of the music at Barwold."

"Dear Barwold!" said Frederica, softly. "Do you know, Mr. Comyn, that my visit there was, in some ways, a revelation to me? I had never stayed in a large, beautiful house before; and the piano—how miserable the poor little instrument here seemed afterwards! Have you seen Esther since her return from the Continent?"

“How should I have seen her?” asked Bernard, sharply. “I shall never go to Grately.”

“When they first went there, Esther wrote full of plans. I was surprised at her energy—she, who was always so dreamy—but she has said nothing lately of restorations or village work. I have often wondered whether she is really happy.”

“Happy!” repeated Bernard, jarringly. “Of course she is happy. She has married the man of her fancy. She lives in a fine, historical old place, and is a great lady in the county, and Hermione says that she has beautiful gowns from Paris. What else is there for a woman to desire?”

“All women are not happy because they live in fine houses, and wear rich dresses, Mr. Comyn; and Esther is not one to be satisfied with such things.”

“Perhaps some require something more, but every woman cares at least to marry the man she loves; is it not so, Frederica?”

Frederica was spared the necessity of replying, for at that moment Aunt Theodosia entered rustling her checked silk with considerable dignity, and brandishing the open volume of Burke in her hand.

“I must beg you to forgive me for having delegated to my niece the delightful office of

receiving you"—Miss Talmadge had rehearsed her little speech on the stairs—"and so great a stranger as you have been of late; but domestic avocations, Mr. Comyn, even in the largest establishment, absorb a great deal of time. I have no doubt that your cousin, Lady Isherwood, with her numerous retinue of servants, would agree with me. Comfort, Mr. Comyn, does not depend so much upon the extent or grandeur of the establishment, as upon the refinement and true dignity of the mind which presides over it. And these attributes," added the old lady with an impressive nod, "birth alone can confer."

Bernard bowed.

"Frederica, my love," continued Miss Talmadge, "you are aware how recollection failed me the other day, with regard to the precise relationship which existed between the friend of my youth, and the distant relative of Mr. Comyn,—Lady Susan Starkie—and the Talmadges and Glencairnes. I have been refreshing my memory by a perusal of Burke, in which the annals of our family are contained. I find the link explicitly defined. Perhaps Mr. Comyn would be interested in our genealogical records, which, stated in Burke, are incontrovertible. He might run his eye down the page while you put away

your drawing-materials. I have told Eliza to bring in tea, and sherry and biscuits."

"No sherry, I entreat," protested Bernard.

"A glass; one little glass? It is a wine which my father put into bottle. 'Beau Talmadge,' as His Royal Highness, the late Duke of Cambridge, was wont familiarly to style him. A finished gentleman of the old school, Mr. Comyn, who used to drive his coach-and-four, and never dreamed of tipping less than a sovereign. I have heard his contemporaries say that it was a privilege to see him walking down Piccadilly, with his hat placed jauntily on one side of his head, and his gold-headed cane in his hand, spurning the very ground on which he trod, as though the whole of London belonged to him."

These reminiscences of her grandfather were particularly painful to Frederica, and, blushing hotly, she escaped from the room on the pretext of seeing if tea was ready. When she returned, Miss Talmadge had drawn her chair close to that on which Bernard was sitting, and with the open Burke before her on the table, was nodding at him convincingly. "I always knew it. Frederica, my love, it is as plain as a pikestaff. I was certain there was a connection. Mr. Comyn's great aunt was second cousin to Lady Susan

Starkie, who, as we have seen here, was distinctly related to the Earls of Glencairne. You would perhaps think me a foolish old woman, Mr. Comyn, if I were to tell you that my heart warmed to you from the first moment of our acquaintance. Blood will make itself felt."

"This is extremely gratifying," said Bernard. "Your aunt, Miss Frederica, has clearly demonstrated, *vide* Burke, that we are cousins in a fifth degree. I shall apply for all the privileges of such near relationship."

"Henceforth," said Aunt Theodosia, darting a sharp glance from Bernard to her niece, "you will be received as one of the family. Consider my door, humble though it be, always open to you, Mr. Comyn. Young men who are bachelors must sometimes feel dull in their chambers. My society has been sought before now by the unmarried of the opposite sex, who have confided to me that the attractions of their clubs have not equalled those of feminine companionship. Though my roof is lowly, my furniture has graced the mansions of the nobility; and my welcome is warm. I don't mind telling you, Mr. Comyn, that I have struggled as few lone women could have done, to keep up my position for the credit of my ancestors. I have pinched my small income in order that I might educate

Frederica to the level of her grand-parents. She is a Glencairne to the back-bone. I have never permitted her to associate with those whom I considered it beneath the dignity of a Talmadge to admit to terms of intimacy."

Aunt Theodosia's flow of eloquence was interrupted by the entrance of the little maid with the tea-tray first, and, secondly, with the salver and the decanter of sherry, which she placed before the guest. "Miss Talmadge," said Bernard, "you are good enough to say that I may make myself at home—and, in the first place, I am a teetotaller; I never drink wine. If I might have some tea—"

"I know," said Aunt Theodosia, magnanimously conceding the point, and inwardly considering how she should cork up the penultimate bottle of the late Colonel Talmadge's sherry. "I know that it is the fashion now, even with gentlemen, to drink tea before dinner, but my father used to call it 'old maid's cat-lap.' I don't mind what you drink, Mr. Comyn, if you'll promise to partake of it here again."

"That I certainly will," replied Bernard. "You'll be getting tired of me, Miss Talmadge. Your niece and I used to play duets at Barwold. I am going to bring some for her to try with me."

“Being fully alive to the importance of music as an attractive element in female education,” said Miss Talmadge, “I have always been careful to provide Frederica with the best instruction, and am competent to pronounce judgment upon that point, having myself tasted the advantages which accrue to a gentlewoman who has the reputation of being brilliantly accomplished. During my visiting life, Mr. Comyn, I made a point of practising for four hours every day upon a silent key-board, and of reading improving works for six. The consequence was, that men fought to take me in to dinner; and in the drawing-room afterwards, I was invariably the cynosure of an admiring circle.”

“You are fond of music,” said Bernard; “then you won’t mind your niece giving us some now. Do play,” he added entreatingly to Frederica.

She opened the old cracked piano and sat down. The winter darkness crept in upon them as she played, gliding from one dreamy air to another, with the fire-light leaping up in fitful gleams, and showing her fair head and delicate profile in relief against the dingy brown paper of the wall.

Miss Talmadge had discreetly left the room; there was a little murmuring of voices in the kitchen, where she was superintending some culi-

nary operations, but it was not loud enough to disturb the harmony. Bernard had drawn a low, morocco-covered stool to the side of the piano, and was bending forward, his head almost on a level with Frederica's fingers. Though his eyes were fixed upon her face, he was thinking of Esther. There was a tender suggestiveness in the music and in the half-light, that stirred his heart with a softer longing than he had known for months. There was a soothing warmth and quietness in the atmosphere of the tiny brown parlour, with its little litter of feminine occupations ; the drawing-box, the books, the music, and the soft graceful presence breathing melody, and suggesting no alarming spasms of emotion—only pleasant, balmy companionship. It was past six o'clock when he took his leave, and it seemed to him that the hours had fled very quickly. To Frederica they had gone like an enchanted dream.

When Bernard reached home, his rooms looked to him strangely bare and comfortless. His writing materials were scattered about. His pipes littered the mantel-shelf. There was a heavy smell of stale tobacco-smoke. His books were dusty, and the fire had gone out. He was going to dine at his club ; but as he glanced at the clock, old Miss Talmadge's words recurred to him, and he felt almost inclined to endorse her

statement that a bachelor needs more than even the delights of a club to make him happy.

Bernard had always prided himself upon his independence of women's society. He had never been of a vicious tendency, though he had always taken a tolerant, free-thinking view of the peccadilloes of other young men—judging the matter rather from an intellectual than a moral or religious standpoint. But he had himself kept clear of most of the pit-falls of youth. That sort of thing, he reasoned, might be pleasant and perhaps necessary to the generality of men, but it was not so to him. As for women, they were well enough in their way, but their way was not his. They were irrational and frivolous; and as long as a man had his books, and means sufficient to enable him to travel and see the world, that was all with which he need concern himself. But somehow, within the last few years, or months? these ideas had changed; and the thought had struck him somewhat frequently of late, that virile humanity is not all-sufficing to itself, and that a wife, who would be an intellectual, plastic, and adoring second self, would not be a creature to be despised. The natural egotism of man demands that he shall have creatures dependent upon him, and looking towards him as the sun of their universe, and who shall, in their turn, supply him

with a motive for action and effort. There was something very melancholy in the picture of a lonely, loveless age ; such, for example, as that of Lydyiard—Lydyiard, who had no channels into which his intellectual faculties or pent-up sympathies might be diverted, save his writing, his reforms, his colonization schemes ; and who frankly owned that life was barren.

Bernard had never been so beset by such thoughts, as upon the evening of his visit to Magenta Terrace. He came home early from his club, where he had fallen in with some would-be young men about town, whose talk had been free and jokes loose and sickening. He sat down to his writing-table, but the flavour of Bohemianism had departed. His imagination went wandering towards a fancy picture of himself leading a decorous married life, with the children in bed, and his wife sitting opposite to him, perhaps working or reading—or drawing ; ready to discuss intelligently the last new review, or latest contribution to scientific knowledge, or to co-operate with him in the plan of a new and less ambitious work.

Two imaginary scenes would rise before him : Esther, with her husband, in her luxurious home—Bernard did not dream that the owner of Grately would have cause to worry his wife over money

matters—smiling caressingly into that handsome, sensuous face, beautifully dressed, and entering with interest born of love into the “county lady business, which she had once declared to be far from her; and Frederica Talmadge, modest and maidenly, and yet full of noble, artistic enthusiasm, painting in the little basement parlour—Esther, whom he loved; Frederica, in whom he was interested.

Bernard thought so often, during the following days, of Magenta Terrace and the inmates of No. 13, that there was nothing unnatural in his looking in again before Christmas, to see how the fan was getting on, and to have some more music.

On Christmas morning there came a little packet to Frederica; a *souvenir-de-Noël*, from Bernard. It was only an engraving from the picture of a soft-eyed Madonna which he had seen in one of the German galleries, and which had struck him at the time as resembling Esther's school-friend. This bestowal upon the supposed object of his affections, of the faint presentment of her own features, did not betoken much lover-like sentiment; but Bernard had not taken this view of the matter, and had merely looked upon the present as a small recognition of her gift to him of the Christmas card. To Frederica herself, the

sending of the picture meant much more. She too saw the likeness to her own face, and whispered to her heart, that Bernard, with true tact and delicacy, had chosen this way of showing her that she had been in his mind from the very dawn of their acquaintanceship. She still preserved the little pencil-sketch she had made of him at Westminster Abbey, attaching to it an almost superstitious reverence, and accepting it as the outward symbol of the interposition of Fate, which had attracted her towards Bernard in a crowd of strangers, and had created a subtle sympathy between them that Time seemed destined to weld more firmly. Upon Miss Talmadge, Bernard's visits, which followed each other in quick succession, coupled with his present to Frederica, made a great impression. She kept out of the way when he called—nodding, and winking, and watching her niece curiously during the intervals. She threw out many mysterious hints, and was several times overheard by the little maid, soliloquizing in the kitchen. "It would not be anything of a match after all—for a Glencairne."

After this, it became rather a habit with Bernard to spend two or three afternoons in each week, in Miss Talmadge's basement parlour. His visits were so frequent that the old lady ceased

to consider it necessary to produce the sherry, or to put on her company gown, though, for the few minutes that she appeared, for propriety's sake, she always preserved her magniloquence of expression, and carefully refrained from exposing the little shifts and contrivances, by means of which she made both ends meet and "kept up her position." He generally dropped in when Frederica's work at the School of Art was over; and there were desultory chats over a flickering fire, while the snow fell softly or the fog choked up the streets without: pleasant lingerings over the piano, and kindly hand-clasps and exquisite thrills of happiness through Frederica's frame, when Bernard's fingers touched her own, or his eyes rested almost lovingly on her face. Bernard had not begun seriously to reflect to what point this soft dalliance was luring him, but Frederica had quite made up her gentle mind, and was treading the primrose path with no qualms as to its ultimate destination.

CHAPTER V.

“YOU HAD ONLY TO CHOOSE.”

THE winter was drawing to a close, and George Brand and his wife were spending a few days at Allerton before the end of the hunting season. There had been successive sets of visitors at Grately, and the husband and wife had been thrown but little into each other's company. It was easy to avoid *tête-à-têtes* when, in the morning, there was, on the part of the men, a stampede out of doors, when the evenings were given up to social intercourse, and when George seldom left the smoking-room till two or three in the morning. Ever since George's unfortunate reference to her penniless condition, Esther had shirked dispensing charity and forming plans, and had kept coldly aloof from her husband, feeding her unhappiness and certainty of his dissatisfaction upon every varying phase in his demeanour. If he was excited or joyous, she imagined that he was trying to drown his disappointment in a fictitious gaiety. If he was

moody and irritable, as much the result of nightly potations and cigars as of any subjective cause, she saw in his depression further evidence of regret. All that touched the abstract side of her emotional existence moved Esther powerfully, and she gave George credit for an equal keenness of susceptibility, whereas, in reality, he had no strongly-rooted capacity for either joy or suffering upon any subject whatsoever; and had Esther shown herself equally resilient, and appeared before him unconscious and cheerful, he would have ceased to remember that he had ever repented his choice of a wife.

But Esther, painfully alive to the dissonance between them, showed in her face and manner an entire want of adaptability to his moods, and all George's regrets came back to him with renewed conviction when he found himself again in the congenial atmosphere of Allerton, with Lina Welby livelier and prettier than ever, ready to receive smilingly his attentions, and with the irritation of jealousy to inflame his admiration.

Dr. Prendergast, Miss Welby's latest conquest, was staying at Allerton. He had been, upon the death of the late Bishop, elected to the Diocese of Woodchester, and was a placid, ruminative individual, who observed much but spoke seldom, and who rarely enunciated an opinion which had

not been previously well aired and well weighed. He had never been known to utter more than a dozen words consecutively; but, if seldom original, they were usually to the point, and he had acquired a reputation for wisdom, and was universally pronounced to be a man of sound judgment. He loved a good dinner, and was a judge of claret, and as no woman had ever yet inspired him openly with a tender passion, Miss Welby had some reason for priding herself upon her conquest.

The engagement was not yet formally announced, but the Bishop, as he hovered about Lina like an elephantine moth—for he was in person large and dignified—round a candle, allowed no doubt to exist as to his intentions. He had proposed, but Miss Welby could not quite make up her mind.

“My love,” said Mrs. Welby, who was all in favour of the Bishop, “only think of the privilege—the blessedness of being united to a spiritual lord.”

“I am not sure that I should not prefer a lord temporal,” replied Lina flippantly; “but he is a dear, fat, comforting creature, and there’s a solidity about him which supplies the gravitating force wanting in me. Darling mammy! I am far from despising the loaves and fishes, and

there is one point in which we shall certainly agree. We shall both be made happy every evening by a good dinner; and I always felt that I should die in the bosom of the Church. I'll think seriously about it."

"But the suspense, dearest Lina; think of the anxiety he must be suffering. He looked quite anxious yesterday."

"I'm afraid he is gouty, darling. Make him drink whiskey and potash-water at dinner. Comforting person! There is no fear that his impetuosity will cause him sleepless nights; and it won't injure his digestion if I keep him waiting a day or two."

But she manifestly inclined towards him, and upon the evening of the Brands' arrival, Mrs. Welby, taking the initiative, confided the state of affairs to Esther. "Dearest Mrs. Brand," she said, turning her great, expressionless eyes upon her guest, "it is most melancholy to think of parting with one's only daughter; but Woodchester is so close, and cathedral society always the most delightful—and the dear Bishop could be like no one else. I can't help regretting that he is perhaps a little broad—but the Lord's Anointed, you know—and then one must reflect that the same thing happens to us all."

"Esther is enjoying one of mother's cream-laid

sentiments," whispered Lina to George; "I can always tell by the placid fixity of darling mammy's gaze when she is uttering anything particularly exhaustive."

"She is talking about the Bishop," exclaimed George savagely.

"Sweet comforting creature! It gives one a sense of repose to look at him."

"I can't think how you stand it," said George with irritation. "The great porpoise never takes his eyes off you, though he is far too indolent to get up and speak to you."

"Dear boy! He does not say much, it is true; but he *thinks*. You don't suppose that it is commendable in clerical dignitaries to hop about like frivolous laymen. My Bishop is a man of weight."

"When is it to be, Lina?" asked George in a melancholy tone.

"I haven't quite made up my mind that 'it' is to be at all yet. If I marry the Bishop, will you come and see me in my palace, George?"

"No," answered George curtly. "I will not."

"That is rude, dear boy. In polite society, when people refuse an invitation, they make a point of saying, 'Thank you.' Why not? I'll promise you the best of cheer. The Bishop

prides himself upon his excellent table, and the quality of his wines."

"Don't chaff, Lina. I don't think that I shall ever come near you again. Every time I see you, I am reminded more forcibly than ever of my folly."

"What folly, dearest boy? I had really begun to fancy that you were much more sensible than you used to be."

"You know what I mean."

"Indeed I don't. Did I ever advise you to buy a horse that went lame the next day, or lead you into flirtations that were likely to get you into trouble with Uncle Coniston? Did I not literally snatch you out of the arms of Molly Robinson, our bailiff's pretty daughter? Have I not always been your guide, philosopher, and friend? And now you turn upon me and reproach me. I shall appeal to your wife. Esther, I have just been accusing George of ingratitude. He says that the sight of me reminds him of some particular folly. A scapegoat was always a necessity to him. You must teach him moral independence."

Esther was crossing to the door, when Lina arrested her. She had been watching her husband's face as he talked to his cousin, and though she felt no jealousy, in the vulgar acceptation

of the word, her sense of helplessness and inner misery deepened as she looked. Her lip quivered at Lina's jesting appeal, in which she discovered a hidden, bitter meaning. The tears rose to her eyes, and without replying she left the room.

"Really you are a very odd bride and bridegroom," said Lina, looking at George inquisitively. "You fall desperately in love with one another upon an island, like the hero and heroine of a poem. Then you are separated in the orthodox fashion, meet again, and marry in the most romantic way, and in less than a year afterwards both look utterly wretched. If that is to be the result of romance, I am glad there is none about my Bishop."

"Esther is not very strong," said George hurriedly; "she is fanciful and hysterical; I'm hanged if I understand women."

When Esther came down dressed for dinner upon the following evening, there was a more confused buzz of voices in the drawing-room, and a greater expanse than usual, of satin drapery falling in picturesque folds upon the carpet, and Lady Isherwood, peach-like and vapid, was seated by the fire, with her silken-shod feet perched upon the fender, and a screen raised in her fat left hand between her downy face and the flame.

Sir Emilius was peering through his spectacles at a pair of Roman snuffers which Mr. Farquharson had rummaged out of the excavations at Puddenham, and ejaculating: "Curious! beautiful! Strange how the ancient forms continue to repeat themselves, and how, after the lapse of centuries, the religion of art revives in all its original purity!"—while the Bishop, warming his nether parts before the fire, and looking round with bland benevolence, remarked ponderously: "It is an interesting fact that the most graceful modern shapes are reproductions."

There was a third stranger, the sight of whose black-coated figure standing near Lina Welby at the piano, sent the blood rushing from Esther's heart to her face, and then back again, leaving her absolutely pallid. It was Bernard. He turned sharply round as the rustle of her dress made itself heard, but averted his eyes immediately and only looked at her again while she greeted Lady Isherwood. It was the first time that he had seen her since the Allerton Ball, a year before, and her changed appearance touched him more deeply than he could have believed possible. It was not that she had grown perceptibly stouter or thinner, or more or less beautiful, but the innocent unconsciousness and abstraction which had marked her face in girlhood had gone from

it. It was wistful and troubled, and though still dreamy at times, had an expression of perplexity, as though experiences had come crowding too quickly into her mind to be comprehended. Her lips drooped even more sensitively than of old, and there were pained lines about her mouth, while the stains of purple beneath her eyes made them look larger, and heightened the natural pallor of her complexion.

The Isherwoods had been expected guests, but Bernard's advent was a surprise. "He only came down this afternoon," Lady Isherwood explained, "and there was no time to send over. I told him it was very bad manners to come here uninvited, but he said you wouldn't mind. I think you look very pale, Esther," she continued. "You never come to see me now, and I wanted particularly to ask you whether you thought that Frederica Talmadge would be offended if I suggested that she should engage with me as a companion. We would treat her quite as one of the family, and the upper housemaid might wait on her. I liked her better than any one we ever had staying with us, and she paints fans so nicely, and has such good taste. I think that I might even have some of my gowns made at home if she would superintend Cullen. Léonie is getting very high, and Emilius has made me

put down one of the carriage-horses, on account of this agricultural depression. But do you think that Frederica would come?"

"I am afraid not, Aunt Hermione. She has her profession, which occupies all her time and thoughts."

"Bernard, you ought to know," said Hermione. "You seem to be always seeing her."

"I don't know how you could contemplate such a proposal seriously," said Bernard. "Of course, Miss Talmadge would not accept it."

"She has her profession," repeated Mrs. Welby softly. "How delightful that must be. One needs something to fill up the void one often feels in life. I used to paint on China once, but that was before Dr. Lightner came, and the Church was restored. Before, there was nothing to make one care for the services. It is wonderful what a difference stained glass windows, and the intoning of the prayers, makes in one's devotional feeling."

"Yes," assented Lady Isherwood; "and the soft light is always so becoming to one's complexion."

"Everything at Allerton has changed for the better," continued Mrs. Welby; "and if dear Lady Elizabeth only cared a little more for ordinances there would be nothing to wish for. I some-

times think that it would be a comfort if dear Lady Elizabeth were taken to a better world."

"A better world?" repeated the Bishop, in an interrogative tone. It was a fashion of his to echo the last phrase of the previous speaker, with a gentle variation of inflexion, which imparted to the remark quite another bearing. Bernard uttered an impatient "Pish," and involuntarily Esther turned towards him. Their eyes met, and with a faint blush, she advanced a step towards him, and held out her hand.

"I did not know that you were to be here to-night," she said confusedly.

"As you heard," replied Bernard, "I arrived unexpectedly. It is a long time since I have seen you. I believe that I ought to congratulate you upon your marriage."

Esther's eyes met his with a kind of dumb entreaty. It seemed to her that in this meeting, under new conditions, their hearts were trying to cry out to each other through the wall of conventional restraint and misconception—that could she once break down the barrier that now kept them asunder, confidence and appeal for sympathy must come rushing to her lips. Dinner was announced, and Bernard was told off to take her in. The party was too small for conversation to be anything but general, and Bernard and Esther

were both unusually silent ; but as they sat side by side, and went through the process of eating, there was in the minds of each the consciousness of a link between them which seemed to set their two lives apart from the other lives around them.

"You look very pale, dear," said Lina sympathetically to Esther, when they entered the drawing-room. "Is your head aching?"

"It is a little," answered Esther, clutching at the excuse for pre-occupation.

"Poor little person ! And all that clack about gowns, and High Church services, must be inexpressibly boring. There is an arm-chair in the conservatory that is too delicious. You shall sit there quite alone till the gentlemen come in. I am sure that the quiet will do your head good."

Esther leaned back among the flowers, and closed her eyes, shutting out the bright drawing-room with its glitter of gilding and Sèvres, and hearing nothing but the confused murmur of Lady Isherwood's gurgling commonplace, and Mrs. Welby's harmonious platitudes. A sense of unreality overpowered her. The remembrance of what and where she was slipped away from her mind, and it seemed to her that she and Bernard were standing despairingly face to face in an empty universe. Then there came the sound of an opening door, and of the Bishop's deep voice

saying sonorously: "I assure you it is an extraordinary claret at the price. It's body is something enormous, and it's bouquet exquisite," and Sir Emilius' piping treble, and of her own husband's somewhat blatant proclamation: "I'll tell you what, sir, if the old Lord had no eye for a horse, he was a good judge of wines, and there is some of the Lafitte of '58 at Grately, which I don't mind laying twenty pounds will beat anything of the kind in any other cellar in Woodfordshire. Come now, the Bishop shall decide."

Esther could tell by the very tone of George's voice that he was a little flushed, and in his mood of after-dinner expansion, and her lips tightened with an involuntary contempt. Though Bernard did not speak, she knew exactly where he came in the procession, and which was his footstep among the others.

"Where is Esther?" asked Lady Isherwood.

"She has a headache, poor darling," said Lina, "and I made her sit down quietly in the conservatory. Don't disturb her. Come here, George. I have had a photograph taken at Bassano's, which I want to show you."

Then they all seemed to settle down, and after a few moments Esther became conscious that Bernard was approaching her.

"Are you there, Esther?" he asked, softly.

"I am here," she replied; and guided by her voice, he groped his way through the dimness of foliage and sat down beside her.

"Your head is aching," he said. He spoke abruptly, and as though he were struggling against a tender interest which was yet evident in his tone. It was so dark in the conservatory that she could only see the outline of his face, as he sat with his back towards the lighted window that led into the drawing-room; but she knew that he was looking at her. He sat silent for a few moments, playing with the leaves of a scented verbena near them, and making odd abrupt movements, as though impulse and reserve were pulling him different ways—then added, "I have not seen you since the ball here; more than a year ago."

"You would not speak to me that evening," said Esther tremulously. "I thought that we were never to be friends any more."

"It was impossible then that we could talk to each other as friends," said Bernard. "I felt that it must be so—always—till a short time ago. I was angry, bitter. Perhaps I was self-confident, and believed what I had no right to think. If it was so, and I misjudged you, and have hurt you by my wrong judgment—I may again be concluding rashly—I ask you to forgive

me. There is something about you to-night which leads me to fancy that we have both been deceived in ourselves and in each other. You seem changed—still unsatisfied. You don't look as I pictured you to myself. Esther, I suppose that you have got what you wanted? Is it so? Are you happy?"

There was a painful silence, and then Esther's voice sounded troubled in the dimness. "No one has a right to expect happiness. I did not expect it."

"What do you mean, Esther?" said Bernard, bending forward and speaking in a quick gasp. "Every woman expects to be happy when she is about to marry the man she thinks she loves. Tell me what you mean. Women have a queer code of honour about these things, I know. They fancy that marriage nullifies all other obligations; but when two people are—have been—as you and I have been, truth at any price is obligatory upon both. You may have failed in openness through some womanish scruple. I am certain that it was so. Be true now. Don't let us continue to misunderstand each other."

"I never wished to be untrue," said Esther. "I only wanted to do what was right. It would have been better perhaps if I had explained—but there is nothing to regret—for nothing could

have been different. Truth seems harder to see than ever. . . . Oh! there are some things which do not bear talking about!" she cried, hurried on as it were beyond herself. Everything appeared changed since she had last seen Bernard. The horizon of her existence had widened—there was in her a need to speak. "There are some things which women ought to hug up as they best can, and never say that they are unhappy or disappointed. It is like groping one's way in the dark, and one must not cry or call for help. Oh, Bernard! can't you understand?"

"Indeed I cannot, unless you will explain yourself more clearly. It is all a mystery to me."

"We strive after what we fancy is highest," Esther went on brokenly, "and then find that we have been mistaken. We cannot make other people's happiness, which is dear to us—in the way that we fancied would have been so easy—and then there is the pain of knowing that nothing can be undone, and that the true happiness of being with some one for whom we care—deeply, must always be denied to us by the force of circumstances."

"Oh, Esther!" said Bernard, growing more bewildered, and only realizing that she had always loved him. "You knew what was in my heart. You had only to choose. If you would

but speak plainly now. Most of the misery in the world comes from cloaking our real feelings."

"There is no use in talking of what could never have been altered," said Esther, still incoherently. "I ought not to have said anything." And just then George's laugh penetrated to the conservatory, and struck upon her ear with a note of upbraiding and accusation. "If I were to tell you that I was unhappy, it would be like wronging my husband. I have no right to accuse him. He has done a great deal for me. I owe him my loyalty; I owed him myself. I gave myself to him when I was a girl. Now, you know. Oh! surely you can understand. It is not great things that determine our happiness or wretchedness; but all kinds of small things—jars, misunderstandings that cannot be put into words—or perhaps a deep regret underlying everything, and poisoning existence to ourselves, and to those nearest us. Bernard, I can't bear to think that you are bitter against me—against him. It is no one's fault. I want to feel that we are friends."

"If by 'we' you mean yourself and your husband," said Bernard, "I cannot couple you together. I cannot shake him cordially by the hand, or make any pretence of common friendship

with him. I have avoided speaking to him this evening. He is distasteful to me. He is unworthy of you. It is best that you should know what I think of him, and that we should keep apart."

"Esther," called Brand from within, and then he stumbled out into the conservatory, and peered round among the plants. "Esther, where are you? Lady Isherwood wants to speak to you about our going to Barwold. Why are you sitting alone in the dark? Oh, you are here, Comyn. Jolly place for a cigarette, isn't it? They never mind one smoking in here. I suppose you haven't a match?"

Bernard rose abruptly, and without taking any notice of George's remark passed into the drawing-room and left the husband and wife together.

"What does the fellow mean?" asked George in a low, wrathful tone. "That is the second time this evening that he has not answered me when I have spoken to him. What does he mean by his——supercilious airs? You know him better than I do—Is that his way of trying to make people believe that he is a better man than I am? I'm hanged if I stand it." Esther was silent. "Why don't you speak? Lina says that you have a headache. If you appear in society at all, I wish you'd be pleasant over it. I should

think if you are seedy, that you had better go to bed."

Esther knew that George's irritation with her was only an outcome of his anger against Bernard, whose rudeness had wounded his self-esteem, but cross words were hard to bear just then. She checked her rising tears as she best could, and went to speak to her aunt, while George re-entered the drawing-room and joined Lina at the piano. Bernard was playing, but he so pointedly ignored George's presence, that the latter turned to Lina in resentment.

"What does the fellow mean by taking no notice of me?"

Miss Welby shrugged her shoulders, and turned aside. George followed her. "What does he mean, Lina?" he asked again.

"Dearest boy, if men will marry pretty wives, upon whom other men have been spooney, they must take the consequences, and not be annoyed at them."

The explanation was rather flattering than otherwise to George's vanity; and after the Isherwoods had departed, and the ladies had retired, he forgot his irritability over a cigar. It was late when he came up from the smoking-room, but he found his wife in her dressing-gown still sitting over her fire. She had been taking

herself to task for dishonourable conduct in speaking as she had done to Bernard, and had been crying as much from contrition as despondency.

"Not in bed yet, Mousie," said George in a kind voice, thinking to himself how pretty she looked, with her flushed cheeks, and her waving dark hair falling over her shoulders. He stood against the mantel-piece looking down upon her with a genial smile. He was in his tenderest mood. "Is that the dressing-gown I bought you in Paris? How pretty that fluffy stuff is—swansdown—is that what you call it? You look nicer in white than in anything else. Is your headache better, dear? You aren't angry with me for being sharp with you; but that fellow Comyn annoyed me. It was very kind of you, Mousie, to sit up for me, but you will be tired. You had better go to bed now."

Esther glanced gratefully at him, with the tears still wet upon her lashes. After her late reflections, there was something comforting in this virile reality, upon whom she had a right to lean. He was her husband; she was bound to him by closer ties than those unsubstantial yearnings which drew her towards Bernard. The sentiment of honour was strong within her, and she recoiled from the vague treachery to this man, who protected, fed, clothed, and, after his fashion,

loved her, which her half-confession to Bernard had implied. It was horrible to think that she—a married woman—had a lover. Bernard was right; it was best that they should be apart.

As she had sat solitary and penitent over the fire, she had felt herself to be morally guilty, and this sense of guilt, of recoil from the evil thing her imagination had suggested, and George's kind, unsuspecting words, turned her emotions towards him in a full rushing tide. He was her husband; he had been her first love. She knew that it was his nature to be hasty, to jump at rash conclusions, and to speak out the thought that was uppermost in his mind. He was fond of her. They had misunderstood each other, and she had expected too much from him. Perhaps, if their hearts were bared to each other in this moment of mutual expansion, all the mists of dissatisfaction might roll away, and they might henceforth lead a life, if not of high-pitched and perfect harmony, at least of reciprocal comprehension and helpfulness.

These thoughts showed themselves in the pleading tenderness that stole over her face, and in the movement she made to draw closer to her husband. George, though he was sometimes irascible, and often obtuse, was easily touched by any demonstration of fondness. He was tender

to his dogs and horses. He would have been an adoring father, had he any children. To a thick-skinned and more animal-natured wife he would, as a husband, have been everything that was desirable, but between him and Esther there always seemed a barrier of unrealizable expectations, and of mutual incomprehension. Neither knew quite how to approach the other. Transcendentalism was a phrase of which he did not know the meaning. If Esther could have accepted him upon his own material basis of eating, drinking, loving, and surface sensibility, she might have learned to appreciate him at a certain value, but she was always rating him either higher or lower than he deserved, expecting too much, or despairing utterly, and when, as to-night, her impulses turned towards him, they were often rebuffed by some crassitude of temperament, density of understanding, or lowering imputation, which made her almost scorn him.

She put her hand up as he stooped to kiss her, and caught his, leaning her cheek against it and looking up at him with a dumb yearning in her eyes which touched him.

"What is it?" asked George. "Are you troubled about anything, Mousie? Tell me. Do you not think that I care. I care about everything that vexes you. I wish that we under-

stood each other better. Somehow everything has changed between us. You don't seem to care about me now as you did upon the island—and when a man has married a woman, he expects something more than mere toleration."

"Oh, George!" cried Esther. "How can you talk of 'mere toleration'? I don't want to defraud you of your rights. I would give you everything—more than you expect, if I could; but it ought not to be a question of giving and taking by measure between husband and wife; we might understand each other; we might be happy together, if you would have it so."

"If I would have it so," repeated George. "I don't know what you mean, Esther; what else would I have! Do you think that this miserable coldness between us is pleasant to me? Have I not married you, and given you everything? Don't I do all I can to make you happy? I dare say that I am a little sharp sometimes, but all wives have to put up with that from their husbands. And you grudge me your love in return. Is all the giving to come from the man's side, and is there to be nothing on the woman's?"

Esther sat despairingly silent.

"You are cold always," continued George. "Your face never brightens when I come into the room, or smile when I speak to you; and I see

other wives who are very different—wives who have no thought but to please husbands, who study their likes and dislikes, and are always cheerful and loving when they are by. It is your disposition, I suppose; you are not affectionate; but you were not always so. It is that which makes it so hard. A man gives up a great deal when he marries. He has a right to expect that his wife will make it up to him, . . . and when I see girls like Lina Welby—”

“George,” exclaimed Esther, almost passionately, “don’t talk of Lina Welby. I know what you are thinking and wishing; and if you want me to be different, to compare me with Lina is not the way to make me alter.”

“You are jealous of Lina.”

“Jealous! I am not jealous. I would scorn jealousy. A man is not worth trying to please if one can be jealous of him. You would have tired of Lina if you had married her as you married me. It was not my heart that you wanted; you never understood me. It was—it was my face, I suppose, that you cared for, and you are tired of that.”

“You think very hardly of me. It is not your face that I care for, though it is very pretty—it is yourself. I am not tired of you, Mousie,” George added caressingly, a good deal

touched, and a little amused at her vehemence. "I loved you very much when I came in here to-night and saw you sitting there with your flushed cheeks and soft eyes—and when you seemed to care—"

"Oh George," said Esther, moved too, "I do care. I want to care. I want to be a good wife to you if you will let me. Help me. Be tender to me. . . ."

"Am I not good to you?" exclaimed George. "Do I not consult your pleasure in every way that I can? Have you not a fine house, horses, carriages, and servants? Have I not given you all these? It is you who have gained, while I have lost. But you do not think of your position in that light—women never do. Don't look so hopeless, Mousie; I am not upbraiding you. If it is your nature to be cold, you can't help it, I suppose. What would you like to do to-morrow? It is a hard frost, and there can be no hunting."

"Aunt Hermione wishes us to drive over to Barwold for luncheon," said Esther apathetically.

"I'm hanged if I go to Barwold or anywhere else to meet that fellow Comyn," exclaimed George, his wrath rising with recollection. "I have no intention of being treated like a cur by a sneaking upstart like that."

"I don't know what you mean," said Esther in a high tone. "He is Aunt Hermione's cousin."

"Are you defending him?" asked George suspiciously. "What were you talking about in the conservatory this evening? Were you abusing me?"

Esther flushed guiltily, but said nothing.

"Well!" said George disagreeably. "Can't you answer? What were you talking about?"

"We were talking of things that happened before my marriage."

"Then you must indulge no further in these interesting reminiscences, unless he can make himself decently agreeable to me. Lina says that he was in love with you."

"If he had been," faltered Esther, "you would understand why he wished to avoid you, and would be generous."

"I don't see that there is any need for generosity in the matter. If he wishes to avoid me, let him avoid you also. I'm very practical and clear-headed about most things, and I don't understand that sort of sentiment. I don't care a rush what he felt, or feels about you. He has no business to give himself airs in my company. By Jove! if he shows his face in my house, I'll kick him downstairs."

George went into his dressing-room, and began

whistling an air which Lina had been playing. "The idea of comparing old Welby's wine with what I have at Grately! That old Bishop thinks himself a judge of claret. I'll show him what I can do in that line," Esther heard him say in a disjointed soliloquy. "It's infernally cold," he exclaimed, and then came in and got into bed. "Are not you coming, Mousie?" he said drowsily, but she did not answer, and soon he was asleep. Esther sat over the fire till it had almost died out. There was a sense of dreary oppression upon her—a kind of gasping need to cry or sob aloud—but she was afraid to do that, lest she should disturb George.

After all, what was her trouble?—and why this perpetual demand upon our sympathy?

There was a soft bed demanding the pressure of her limbs; and all kinds of luxurious appliances scattered about the chamber. She would awake upon the morrow to a life of material ease. She had a husband who had just assured her of his love, and who was the hero of her girlish dreams. Why this yearning dissatisfaction that was ever upon her?

"Are you not coming to bed, Mousie?" muttered George, stirring uneasily. "You will catch cold if you sit up any longer." Chilled by her long watch, Esther slipped off her dressing-gown, and crept into bed by his side.

CHAPTER VI.

AUNT THEODOSIA'S DIPLOMACY.

"FREDERICA," said Miss Talmadge suddenly one morning, "what is Mr. Comyn's address?"

"His address! Aunt Theodosia?" repeated Frederica, looking up from her drawing with guilty cheeks. "It is Jermyn Street, I think; I don't know the number. Why do you want to know?"

"He has not been here for—let me see how long," said Miss Talmadge, counting upon her fingers. "I think it was the day I went to see Mrs. Beasley at Islington, and lost my new umbrella in the omnibus. That is three weeks ago; I remember it perfectly. A very genteel young man accosted me as I was ascending the steps, and offered to assist me. He got out before I did, and I shall believe to my dying day that he appropriated my umbrella. Yes; that was the last time Mr. Comyn came to see us."

"He may have been away from home, Aunt Theodosia."

“Perhaps so, my love ; but there are courtesies which society demands, and which are due to the humblest. Good breeding would have suggested some intimation of the reason of his absence. It would be only kindness to make Mr. Comyn aware that we have noticed his remissness.”

“Oh, Aunt Theodosia,” cried Frederica in alarm, “you were not thinking of writing to Mr. Comyn. You would not do anything so—”

“I hope, Frederica,” said Miss Talmadge severely, “that I do not require instruction in points of etiquette. You may feel assured that under *all circumstances*”—there was an ominous pregnancy in the utterance—“I shall maintain the dignity of a Glencairne. Mr. Comyn may, as you suggest, be out of London, but it would have shown a sense of what is due to me, had he acquainted us with the fact.”

Frederica was herself considerably troubled at Bernard's silence and absence. Their intercourse had been going on smoothly, and tending so certainly, she had believed, to the end she wished. Life had seemed so Elysian till three weeks ago, when, without a word of explanation, his visits had abruptly ceased. What could it mean? Could it be that Bernard had guessed her secret, and was trying to show her, in the most conclusive way, how entirely without foundation

were her dreams. She mentally went over his looks and words, but all seemed rather to corroborate her hopes, and she could find no clue to his neglect, in anything that had passed between them. It was her disposition to bear disappointment patiently; and except for an increased paleness, a slight languor, and lack of interest in her domestic occupations, she appeared much as usual. The School of Art was closed for the vacation, and at this time she was obliged to paint at home. Her work seemed to supply in part the void that Bernard had made; but the light was often dim at Magenta Terrace, and frequently she found it necessary to put away her palette before the afternoon waned. "Oh, if I were only able to take a studio!" she exclaimed despairingly one day.

"My love," said Aunt Theodosia, looking up (with a moistness in her old eyes) from the polishing of the Glencairne salver: "Why should you be always troubling yourself about your painting? I don't like to see you working on day after day, as though you had nothing else to look forward to in life. Not that I ever objected to it as a profession, for your grandfather was, as I have often told you, a patron of Art, and—I never had any time for drawing—it was one of the few things I did not do; but I once had

serious thoughts of becoming an authoress: 'Theodosia,' Lady Susan Starkie used frequently to say to me, 'your letters and conversations are worthy of being printed.' Literary composition, as you may have observed, Frederica, is an accomplishment in which I excel. You have never perused a sentence of my penning, which was not well rounded, with the longest word always last; but in those days I had different views, and I did not realize then as I do now, that a Glencairne cannot be degraded by work. These old fingers are accustomed to labour. They have toiled and scraped in secret for the honour of the family, and for you; but you have your pretty face, my love, and your talents, and when the old woman dies, there'll be enough put by to keep you from starving. If you marry you won't go to your husband quite empty-handed."

"Aunt Theodosia," said Frederica, "don't talk of my marrying."

"And why not?" asked the old lady sharply. "A Glencairne never died an old maid for lack of offers. My love, I could tell you of men who have called me an angel to my very face; but I was difficult to please. I had my model of a finished gentleman always before me, and I would take nothing lower. The new school does not come up to the old—still I know a young man

who, if not quite your grandfather's equal.
and you have your old aunt to keep up your dignity, and to show them that you are as good as the grandest in the land. It is the elders who should look after their children. During my visiting life I have frequently been taken into the family councils when an alliance was on the tapis, and there was always a pause, a brief interval devoted to inquiry and consideration, for who was to say that there was not a bar sinister, or even lunacy, to render the party ineligible. I thank a merciful Providence that the Talmadges have no blot upon their escutcheon; and I was determined that he should know everything in good time, that he should see our pedigree set down in black and white in the Peerage."

"Oh, Aunt Theodosia!" cried Frederica, crimson in her excitement and alarm; "what are you talking of?" There is no question of a marriage or of—any one in particular—who cares to know about the Talmadges and Glencairnes. It is my profession that I ought to think of—that, and Clara and Emily, who will have to do something for themselves—oh, if I could only make some money, and if we could only have a home together!"

"My love," said Aunt Theodosia; "no man

ever likes to be burdened with his wife's relations, and Clara and Emily are children yet; one of them might come to me when you are gone. Do not make yourself unhappy about them."

"Aunt Theodosia," exclaimed Frederica, desperately, "you have got some shameful idea into your head. I know that you have. You make me blush with humiliation at the thought that you may say or do something which I should never get over—never, as long as I live. If it is Mr. Comyn you are thinking of, you are quite wrong and mistaken. I heard you speaking to Eliza the other day, saying that there was no knowing what might happen; I am certain that you were referring to me. It is such things as these which degrade. What right had you to speak of your own niece to a servant?"

"What right?" echoed Miss Talmadge, furious with the consciousness of guilt. "You presume to teach me what I should, or should not, communicate to my own servants. I, who have had menials bowing down before me, and who once numbered two Dowager Duchesses and sixteen foreign princesses on my visiting list. And it is you, whom I have bred and nurtured, who dares to find fault with me. I had better go to the kitchen and clean the grate—that is all I am fit for," added Aunt Theodosia, with bitter emphasis;

"and the society of a butcher's drudge is best suited to me now."

Miss Talmadge left the parlour, muttering wrathfully to herself, and Frederica gathered up her chalks, and went miserably upstairs to her own bedroom. It was very cold, for Miss Talmadge's economy forbade fires in the sleeping-chambers, but Frederica was too wretched to mind that. She took from a secret receptacle, Bernard's idealized portrait, and one or two notes that he had written her, and found some melancholy comfort in contemplating these relics of her love; but presently she heard Aunt Theodosia's step upon the stairs, and had barely time to hustle away her treasures before the plumed bonnet appeared in the doorway.

The old lady looked dignified and uncompromising. She suffered herself no indulgence in soft speech, but in truth her heart yearned to the girl.

"I am going out," she said; "I have some little purchases to make, and some business to transact. You need not wait dinner for me; I'll have some cold pork when I return."

She disappeared, and Frederica heard her rummaging about downstairs, as if in search of something; she evidently found what she wanted, for presently the street door closed behind her,

and numbed and depressed, Frederica returned to her drawing in the basement parlour.

Aunt Theodosia walked briskly out upon her business. It was mostly of a domestic nature, but there was an important mission to be accomplished later. A great resolve had been shaping itself in Miss Talmadge's mind, and her words with Frederica, the sight of her niece's tear-stained face, and the glimpse she had caught of Bernard's portrait, strengthened it into an immediate intention. The Talmadges, she reflected, were not like an ordinary family. Where passive quiescence was all that could be expected from the plebeian ones of the earth; resolute action—determination not to be trampled upon—was demanded by right of blood from them. A Glencairne could not be permitted to pine miserably because a suitor had wooed and ridden away. The young man must be made to feel that it was not an ordinary specimen of womanhood whom he was treating so cavalierly. The honour of the house exacted that the only responsible elder left should interfere. Not in the way of stooping to canvass for a husband—no—a Glencairne must be wooed royally, and had no need to sigh for a mate; but if a Glencairne had condescended to bestow her affections upon a particular individual, that individual must be

given to understand that a daughter of the house might not be played fast and loose with. He must either come with a definite intention, or not come at all.

Miss Talmadge, in spite of her asseveration, that she had "not remained single for the want of asking," knew some of the bitterness of disappointed love, and though she was vexed with Frederica, her heart bled for her. She was indignant with Bernard, too, but was willing to wait further proof before condemning him. Though not quite a finished gentleman, he was, in her estimation, a very genteel young man, to whom her heart had warmed from the first. Perhaps it was diffidence upon the score of poverty that kept him away. Miss Talmadge knew that he had an income of eight hundred a-year; but what was that, she argued, in the sphere to which he belonged, and which was only a degree lower than that in which she had formerly shone with such brilliance? And young men had extravagant notions, and were so spoiled by the comfort of their clubs, and so imposed upon by their flunkeys. Flunkeyism was an institution which Aunt Theodosia regarded with abhorrence, though at the same time with a certain awe, as an appanage of the higher orders. Upon eight hundred a-year, Bernard and Frederica,

with the benefit of her wisdom and experience, might live in gentility, and even moderate luxury, with two maids and, perhaps, a page-boy. With what delighted pride she would assist in organizing the establishment of her niece, Mrs. Comyn—though far be it from her to break bread too frequently at the expense of her nephew-in-law.

All these thoughts passed through Miss Talmadge's brain as she transacted her minor business,—laying in supplies for the week's modest consumption, purchasing a coal-scuttle at a second-hand dealer's, and chaffering over the bargain, turning over the cheap wares displayed at the corners, and pausing to contemplate a grey travelling-costume in the window of a great West End mercer—for she had taken an omnibus from the Brompton Road to Oxford Circus, and was walking down Regent Street. "Thank Providence, Turks are up a little," she said to herself; "and if I have to sell out shares for Frederica's trousseau, I shan't lose by it." She was very hungry, and looked a little wistfully into a fashionable restaurant, where ladies, who came to town for the day's shopping, regaled themselves upon hot chocolate or mock-turtle soup; but Aunt Theodosia had the spirit of a martyr and the stomach of a

camel. How could she have bought her furniture, educated her niece, and maintained the credit of the Glencairnes, if she had indulged in soup at ninepence a plate, or even in promiscuous Sally Lunn's? There was something truly heroic in Miss Talmadge's self-denial—and it was all for Frederica and for the honour of her family.

She turned into Jermyn Street, and walked up and down twice, before she could make up her mind to knock at the door of Bernard's chambers. In her rummage before leaving home she had found a note from him, and had therefore made herself certain of his address. She did not feel quite happy about what she meant to do, nor had she determined exactly what she would say.

"It is not for a Glencairne to be trampled upon," she assured herself several times. Had not Lady Susan Starkie, she reflected, devotedly gone to interview a young man in similar fashion, when the happiness of her friend Theodosia Talmadge had been at stake? To be sure, the step had not been followed by satisfactory results, but what Lady Susan Starkie had encountered for the sake of a friend, she, Miss Talmadge, could surely brave, when the welfare of her best beloved depended upon her tact and courage. "Things

can't have changed entirely since my visiting days," she whispered to herself as she rang the bell.

Bernard's man-servant opened the door; he looked astonished at the sight of the erect old lady in her long, shabby cloak, with her bag, her umbrella, and her cotton gloves. "Is Mr. Comyn at home?" asked Miss Talmadge, with a dignified air, though she was a little awed by this representative of flunkeyism in plain clothes.

"Mr. Comyn is in," said the servant, "but he is always busy in the mornings. What name shall I say?"

"Miss Glencairne Talmadge," said Aunt Theodosia. "I will follow you. You need be under no apprehension that Mr. Comyn will not receive me. I am a connection of the family."

The servant led the way up three flights of stairs, while Aunt Theodosia followed him with tightened breath, into the little study, where Bernard sat at his writing-table, with his books and MSS. scattered about him.

"Miss Talmadge," he exclaimed, rising and holding out his hand. "This is a surprise. I am afraid that you are very much out of breath with your climb; but the truth is, I have let the two lower stories. It pays better, you see; and my diggings, if they are high, are airy."

Aunt Theodosia seated herself, but for several seconds she was too breathless to speak. "I—I really," she gasped. "It's my heart, Mr. Comyn. The doctors have told me that my internal organization is so delicately adjusted, that agitation or haste is highly injurious to my system."

"Take a glass of sherry," said Bernard, opening a cellaret near him and producing a decanter and a wine-glass. "You'll excuse my rough ways, Miss Talmadge. I can't say that my grandfather put this into bottle, but it is not bad stuff." He poured out a glass and handed it to her. "You really must, after your walk. It is only returning hospitality, you know," as Miss Talmadge waved her hand and shook her head in protest. "I shall be offended if you don't."

Aunt Theodosia accepted the wine. It was brown sherry and very strong. She sipped it, becoming gradually more composed, and waxing also extremely courageous. A young man who pressed so politely—a young man who was so nearly a finished gentleman, and who seemed so glad to see her, could not be a deceiver.

"Mr. Comyn," said she, "you may be surprised at this invasion of your domicile by an old lady."

"Not at all," interrupted Bernard; "I am delighted."

"But the truth is that I—we—were becoming somewhat apprehensive on your account. You have not been near us for—shall I say three weeks?"

"I'm afraid that you are drawing it mildly," said Bernard. "It must be a month good. I have been shooting in Woodfordshire, and since I came back have been awfully busy."

"In investigating family matters," suggested Aunt Theodosia, too full of her preconceived notions to question the expediency of the remark.

"Not exactly," said Bernard, looking surprised. "Sir Emilius Isherwood does that. You see I don't set such store by my family as you do by yours, Miss Talmadge."

"Mr. Comyn," began Miss Talmadge, with a reddening face, as she put down her wine-glass.

"Allow me," said Bernard taking it from her. She had been tired with her walk, poor old lady, and the unaccustomed beverage had the effect of unloosening her tongue. She went on: "I have ever been proud of my pedigree, and I hope that I shall continue so, as long as there is blood in my veins. *Noblesse oblige*. It is a beautiful motto, Mr. Comyn, and there are things one would do for the sake of one's family which one might hesitate to do for oneself individually—which might, in the estimation of some vulgar minds, and

perhaps truly, degrade a woman who had the misfortune to be of humble ancestry."

Bernard bowed interrogatively.

"But I thank a merciful Providence," continued Aunt Theodosia, her voice rising, as it always did when she became excited—"and it is all written down in Burke, of the year '40, Mr. Comyn—that my birth elevates me above such considerations. We may have our little shifts. Poverty may have reduced us to riding in an omnibus, instead of in a coach-and-four, which was the equipage in which my grandfather and Frederica's great-grand-parent rolled through the streets of London; but the distinguishing marks of ancestry remain to us. We cannot walk in a crowd unobserved. No matter in what humble apparel we may garb ourselves, our Birth still shines resplendent. We are Glencairnes, Mr. Comyn, and not to be treated lightly."

"I am sure," said Bernard, "that no one could have a higher respect for the Glencairnes than I have, Miss Talmadge."

"I am glad to hear it," said Miss Talmadge. "It is fitting that it should be so, for you also are of our blood, Mr. Comyn—through my dear friend, and distant relative, Lady Susan Starkie. And that brings me to the matter of my visit.

Some small misapprehension may have arisen—a delicate scruple perhaps. No one understands these little difficulties better than I do—and if you would confide in me. If it were only that which had caused the cessation of your visits.”

“I am extremely sorry, Miss Talmadge,” began Bernard, “if you have thought—”

“It is not what I have *thought*, Mr. Comyn,” said Aunt Theodosia, “but what is becoming to me as a lady and a Glencairne, and to you,” she added with emphasis, and fixing him with her eye, “as a man of honour.”

“I hope,” said Bernard, drawing back slightly, “that my conduct as a man of honour is free, in your mind, from any imputation.”

“Society was differently organized in the days of my visiting life” said Miss Talmadge. “Since that time, the laws of etiquette may have altered. I will not say that they have not, but I abide by what was instilled into me by those who had a right to teach—by the example of the dear friend of my youth, Lady Susan Starkie. In those days when I was younger, and perhaps more conversant with such delicate matters, it was customary for the representative of the family to interfere when the happiness of his or her female relatives was at stake. A hint on his or her part was

sufficient ; it was understood. A finished gentleman had his unalterable code of honour. When he found that he had knowingly, or inadvertently, aroused expectations which it was out of his power to realize — he withdrew, Mr. Comyn."

Aunt Theodosia nodded as she deliberately pronounced the concluding words of her harangue. She was pleased with her own eloquence, and felt that she had put the matter delicately, yet forcibly. There could be no misapprehension of her meaning. And at the same time she had mentioned no names, and had said nothing which could directly compromise her own dignity, or that of her niece. She felt confident of a happy result to her diplomacy.

Bernard was cutting a pencil, which he had taken up from the table near him, and continued his occupation as he answered pointedly : "Am I to infer from this—hint—with which you have favoured me, Miss Talmadge, that you wish my visits at your house to cease entirely?"

Poor Aunt Theodosia did not realize how clearly Frederica's future had defined itself in her imagination till Bernard's cold reply effaced its fair outlines. "That was not quite what I meant to imply," she answered with a little falter in her voice. "There are—circumstances under

which you would be welcome." Oh! was her darling to be made miserable because this obtuse—this wicked young man, had no sense of the distinction that had been conferred upon him? "That must depend upon yourself. It is not of you I am thinking—not your happiness, which is dear to me. A man may indulge in society which he finds pleasant—and music, and philandering, and all that. No harm comes to him; but a woman, a young girl, must suffer, and make no sign even if her heart is breaking . . . Not that I would have you think . . ." cried Aunt Theodosia suddenly, pulling herself up, and glaring at Bernard. "Oh, no. A Glencairne has no need to stoop—but we cannot be played fast and loose with. We are not like common people. I am a poverty-stricken old woman, it is true, but I can guard my own. I have my pride. I might have sunk to the level of my income, but I have said to myself: 'No; Theodosia Talmadge may starve, but she will never stoop to what is beneath her.' A merciful Providence has enabled me to live respected; to furnish my house in a style befitting my birth; to educate my niece, and to put by a little for her. She will not be quite penniless when the old aunt dies. Oh, yes; I can look after my own—all that I have in the world to be fond of."

Miss Talmadge's voice was trembling with emotion. Bernard put down his pencil, and looked across at the old lady. She was sitting bolt upright, fingering her bag, and tapping her foot, while she stared straight before her, as though to ignore the fact that there was a large moist drop in each eye.

"Miss Talmadge," said Bernard gently, "don't distress yourself any further. I am sorry that you should have been troubled by any doubt as to my intentions. May I come and see Frederica this afternoon? Will she be at home?"

Miss Talmadge's mental kaleidoscope assumed instantly its original proportions, and she thought of the grey travelling-dress, and the rise in Turks. But her exultation was a little damped by the dread lest she had sacrificed an iota of her niece's dignity.

"I don't think that Frederica meant to go out to-day," she said, with a slight hesitation. "Mr. Comyn, I may go away feeling satisfied that I have not lowered myself, or any one else, in your estimation—may I not? You have understood me? A Glencairne has a right to look high—and there was a time when this would have been a condescension."

"Rest assured, Miss Talmadge," said Bernard, "I consider that the unworthy person who may

be fortunate enough to have secured your niece's heart has obtained a treasure beyond price. I have always felt this strongly."

Miss Talmadge wiped away the drops which threatened to fall. "I am glad to hear you say so, Mr. Comyn. She is a good darling, and will indeed be a treasure to the man upon whom she elects to bestow herself. It is not for a Glencairne to sue for a husband."

"I have no doubt, Miss Talmadge," said Bernard gallantly, "that many a disconsolate swain has sued for you."

Aunt Theodosia rose, smiling blandly. "Ah, Mr. Comyn, you may think it flattery, but the compliments I have had paid me in my time!—enough to turn an ordinary woman's head, but I had a mind above that. There was a Colonel Destiac—he is dead now, poor fellow; and *the* most finished gentleman — of the old school. The first time he ever set eyes upon me, he said to Lady Susan Starkie, with whom I was staying, 'Lady Susan, your young friend is the most angelic being that ever crossed my path.' But I was slim in my young days; with a dolly waist and back; Frederica, though she is tall and elegant, will never have her old aunt's back. I assure you, Mr. Comyn, it was not much broader than my hand. I declare that is two o'clock

striking, and I have been keeping you all this time from your luncheon. I'll take my leave now, Mr. Comyn; we shall meet again by-and-by. I am sure that your natural delicacy will bid you refrain from informing Frederica that I have been here this morning."

"You may trust me, Miss Talmadge. That will be a little secret between ourselves."

"Bless you, dear boy," cried Aunt Theodosia with effusion, warmly shaking his hand. "And now I can go home to Frederica, happy."

Bernard escorted Miss Talmadge downstairs, and closed the door upon her. "My aunt-in-law!" he said aloud, with a little laugh, as he threw himself in an arm-chair. Miss Talmadge as a near relative, might not have been to many men a pleasing feature in the prospect, but Bernard's odd independence of character made him less susceptible than most people to such a consideration. He smiled in amused toleration as he thought over the interview. But it had changed the whole tenor of his reflections, and he wrote no more that day, but gave himself up to visions of the future, as it had suddenly presented itself to his imagination.

Though he had not as yet seriously contemplated making Frederica his wife, he had been unconsciously drifting towards the idea, and

all his thoughts of her were tender and soothing, and fraught with affectionate interest.

He had not been to Magenta Terrace since his return from Woodfordshire, because his feelings had been diverted into another channel by the meeting with George Brand and his wife at Allerton, and he had worked feverishly, in the effort to efface from his memory Esther's sad, tremulous face, and the broken words in which she had implied that her marriage was a mistake. But whatever it might be, it was irrevocable. She had chosen her own lot, and must abide by it. Might it not be best for them both that he should place a double barrier between them? He had told himself in the old days, before he had quite realized what place Esther held in his heart, that Frederica had every quality which he could desire in his wife. In every particular she was love-worthy, and she had all those definite, moral and mental attributes that an intellectual man is right to wish for in his life-companion and the future mother of his children; whereas Esther, a creature of vague possibilities, and uncertain harmonies vibrating at the gentlest touch, might have proved entirely unsuited to the wear and tear of common-place life. He might, later on, have made the painful discovery that their natures were not attuned, and only misery and dis-

sonance might have resulted from their union. It was better perhaps, that their lives should have been ordered apart.

In the usual order of things Bernard walked from his chambers to Magenta Terrace, but this afternoon his reverie made him late, and it was necessary to take a cab. The lamps had just been lighted in the dingy, narrow street when he drew up at Miss Talmadge's door. The little maid looked mysterious and important as she let him in. Doubtless Aunt Theodosia, in her elation and incapacity for keeping silence, had dropped a hint of what might happen, and Eliza was far from indifferent to the romance of a love affair.

A gentleman who drove in a hansom, and flung the driver a two-shilling-piece, without haggling over the extra sixpence, was a suitor after whom Miss Frederica might reasonably pine; but now he had come back to his allegiance, and all was going to be made straight. Miss Talmadge, upstairs in her own bedroom, had heard Bernard's knock, and stood breathless with excitement upon the landing, watching over the banisters till he had been admitted. It would have seemed to her more fitting that the momentous interview should take place in the drawing-room, in the midst of her household glories, with

the portrait of the late Colonel Talmadge smiling benevolent approval upon his grand-daughter's betrothal, but she had not dared to have a fire lighted in this sacred apartment, lest Frederica should suspect what had been her morning's mission. She was fain to comfort herself with the reflection : "He has seen the drawing-room, and perhaps it is just as well not to begin using it ; for I could not keep the chairs peppered from the moths, and coal is dear this winter."

The little maid, acting upon private orders, showed Bernard down-stairs, and unannounced, into the basement parlour where Frederica was sitting. The fire was burning brightly, and she was stooping over it, the flames casting gleams upon her purple gown and fair head. All the rest of the room was in shadow except where the silver, which Miss Talmadge had been cleaning, and which in her excitement she had forgotten to put away, caught the glow.

Frederica had heard the cab drive to the door, and had recognized Bernard's voice asking for her. She felt sick with inward longing and excitement. Could it be that he had come with a definite purpose ? Something in the tone of his voice and the resolution of his tread suggested the idea. Was the desire of her soul to be granted at last ?

She rose blushing and trembling as he entered, and she never could tell afterwards how he accosted her, or what she replied, or how she became suddenly aware, without any elaborate leading up to his purpose, what was the object of his visit. He felt so sure of her that it did not occur to him to affect any doubt or hesitation, and, as we have seen, lack of self-confidence was not characteristic of Bernard's disposition. His frame did not thrill at the touch of her fingers as when Esther and he had joined hands in the drawing-room at Barwold; but if there was no passion, there was sufficient depth of tenderness in his manner to satisfy the most exacting requirements, as, after the interchange of a few embarrassed words which revealed to each the consciousness of the other, he put his arms round her waist and drew her to him.

"Frederica," he said, "you must guess why I have come, and that I am going to ask if you will be my wife? . . ."

Their lips met tremblingly—it was Frederica's first love kiss. . . .

Upstairs, Miss Talmadge, her front awry, her fingers twitching with anxiety, stood, still peering over the banisters. The little maid, quite as eager as her mistress, rushed up to her.

“Oh! ma’am, they’re at it now — he’s with her—”

“Hush!” said Miss Talmadge with dignity. “Eliza, you must remember of whom you are speaking. They are not like common people, and it is no great match for a Glencairne. There was a time in my visiting life when I was the pet and plaything of the aristocracy, that I should have thought myself demeaned had I stooped to a commoner. Mr. Comyn is a very genteel young man, but he is not the equal of my father. Go back to your work, child, and do not listen. Remember that eaves-dropping is as dishonourable in a scullion as in her mistress.

CHAPTER VII.

“YOU HAVE MADE THE BURDEN OF MY
OBLIGATIONS TOO HEAVY FOR ME.”

ONE morning, about this time, Esther was feeling lonely and depressed, and the thought struck her that she would drive over to Allerton and consult with Lina Welby about the Hunt Ball at Woodchester, to which Mrs. Welby had asked that she would chaperone her daughter. Esther did not care much for balls. She had never been to any in her life except that at Allerton, and two or three in Rome, but George had expressed a wish that she should be present, and that, as it would be her first public appearance in the county since her marriage, she should appear with all pomp. She hesitated a little before ordering the carriage. It was not usual with her to make long expeditions without first consulting her husband, for George liked his leave to be asked about anything that had to do with the stable; but it happened that upon that day he had started early for a distant meet,

the very last of the season, and the project had only occurred to Esther after his departure. She was feeling that oppression of solitude, from which young wives so often suffer in their early married life. Books seemed to have lost much of their charm ; needlework had never had any special attraction, and parish matters had not become sufficiently part of her life to be a resource against *ennui*. There were no very near neighbours at Grately, and the Woodfordshire ladies, as is frequently the case in hunting counties, where sons and husbands monopolize horse-flesh, were not much given to visiting among themselves. Esther ate her luncheon alone, and set out soon afterwards on her eleven miles drive.

It was a clear February day. The birds were twittering quite joyously, and the air was balmy and sweet, with a pleasant foretaste of spring. The fat, yellow aconites were lifting their button heads above the mould ; and by stretching her imagination Esther could fill the void squares and the garden with geraniums and calceolarias, could sniff primroses of the future, and enamel the lawn with daises.

Keenly susceptible to external and atmospheric influences, Esther felt her whole being expand with the promise of better things. The wintry sun shed cold gleams across the patches of still

unmelted snow, and a few dropping stalactites hung yet from the leafless branches of the trees; but the crocuses and snowdrops were flowering in the borders, and nature seemed to whisper a hope of coming warmth.

As she leaned back in the brougham Esther reviewed her mental attitude towards her husband. It was not a cheering retrospect. Only that morning more jarring words had been spoken. George had not meant to be unkind, and had forgotten the matter almost before he had ridden off, seemingly well content with himself; but Esther had remained at home, and had not forgotten, though she had spent the morning in her pleasant boudoir, with everything about her to distract her thoughts and to make life enjoyable. She had felt more keenly than ever that want of harmony between the inner and the outer, which all her life had troubled her. Everything seemed fair and prosperous to outward seeming, while within all was jarring and bitterness.

To her limited knowledge it seemed so everywhere. At home people were careless and biting to each other, never appearing to mind how they wounded each other's tenderest susceptibilities. All the kindness and sympathy came from without—from strangers with whom there was no close, mutual bond. Whose

fault was it? Must it be the inevitable result of proximity that the mask should fall and reveal all the pettiness and unloveliness beneath? Why should the closeness of daily companionship disclose all that was mean and grovelling in human nature? Esther had the unhappy longing to peer below the surface of externals, to get at a spring, a reason for motive and action, by which she might try and reconcile both.

Had she been older, had she learned better the philosophy of living, she would have seen that egoism was in a great part at the root of her discontent—that self-absorption, which is not vanity, but rather a morbid, introspective groping after truth. In the comparative one-sidedness of her nature lay the source of her dissatisfaction and incapability, not in the greatness of her aspirations, in painful contrast with the meanness of her spiritual circumstances.

Struggling child-like against the sense of hopelessness and difficulty, Esther told herself, with a futile attempt at belief, that perhaps she was altogether to blame. She felt things too keenly, and expected too much. She perhaps needed the stimulus of a healthy material impulse to draw her from the abstract, and interest her in the concrete. She would try to find some such. God might be gracious to her by-and-by, and

send her children, who should fill that terrible vacuum in her life.

She was in the full swing of her reflections when the carriage drew up at Allerton. Mrs. Welby was not at home, but the butler believed that Miss Welby was in the morning-room; he was not certain, but he would inquire, if Mrs. Brand would walk that way, and knowing Lina's desultory habits, Esther told the man he need not precede her. If Miss Welby was not in the morning-room, she would wait there till her re-entrance. But Lina was there, and playing evidently to herself, for the sound of chords, struck disjointedly, fell upon Esther's ear, and ceased abruptly ere she had reached the door of Lina's retreat. Esther opened it and stood for a few seconds on the threshold in mingled indignation and surprise at the scene which presented itself.

The morning-room at Allerton was a cheerful apartment opening out of the hall, full of soft, lounging chairs and couches, and littered with books and magazines. A large log burned on the hearth, and a cottage piano was placed in a recess near the fire-place. A single easy-chair beside it, was suggestive of a *tête-à-tête* flirtation; and, truth to tell, many a one had Miss Welby carried on in that cosy corner, with her adorer's

face upon a comfortable level with her wrists, and his ear just at a convenient angle to catch the soft-toned phrases which flowed in harmony with the music. An uncomfortable seat for the Bishop, who was ponderous and obese, but just suited to a lithe shape like that of Brand, and a ready hearing that could interpret without difficulty subtle inflexions of voice and melody. It was her own husband whom Esther surprised in the enjoyment of this somewhat compromising position. He was bending forward with his eyes up-turned to Lina's face, in an eager, passionate gaze—how well Esther knew that pose—while she, smiling down upon him in a half-seductive, half-rebuking manner, fingering the keys with one hand, attempted to withdraw the other which he had seized, and, as Esther stood in the doorway, pressed with fervour to his lips.

“Dear boy!” murmured Lina, with a coy, comical look. “You forget—the Bishop.”

“Hang the Bishop!” exclaimed George. “You like me better than the Bishop; confess now, Lina.”

“Well, I wouldn't quite say that, dear boy, though you are very comforting and nice sometimes.”

“You do,” cried George, growing more eager

and excited. "You would have cared for me if I had not been such a confounded fool. Tell me," he went on; "it can't make any difference now. Would you have married me if—"

He stopped abruptly as Lina, starting from her seat, wrenched her hand from his, and pointed with a forced smile to the doorway where Esther, like one petrified, stood. "It is a perfect drawing-room comedy," she cried, recovering her self-possession in a moment. "Esther, who would have dreamed of seeing you? George wants keeping in order. You have so spoiled the naughty boy by allowing him to indulge his naturally spooney disposition, that he can't help kissing the paws of any young woman who happens to be handy—when yours are not available." Truly Miss Welby was a young lady not easily taken at a disadvantage.

George reddened at the sight of his wife, and laughed a little awkwardly.

A great wave of scorn and indignation swept over Esther's soul. She despised her husband at the moment too deeply to feel personally hurt or outraged. What did it matter to her that he preferred Lina Welby to herself now? The shame was not to his wife, but to himself—in his double-dealing—in the light facility with which he transferred his affections from one object to

another, without seeming to regard the sacredness of the obligation he had taken upon himself. Esther knew perfectly well that his admiration for Lina could not for a moment be dignified by the name of love. She would have despised him less, could she have believed him capable of struggling against a genuine passion, even if he should finally yield to it ; but this was just easy, ignoble, trifling ; only his loose way of playing with the most holy feelings, and letting them go again a little defiled by his handling ; of indulging his transient impulses without knowledge of any deeper spring of emotion than gratification of the desire of the moment. Lina and he—they were both the same—they would have been well mated. Oh, what a pity it was that they could not marry and tire of one another as they would inevitably do before the year was out !

All that Esther felt was expressed in her face, as she closed the door behind her, and advanced to where the two stood. George looked ashamed and sheepish, but angry too. He was exceedingly annoyed with Esther for her inopportune appearance, but at the same time he was vexed with himself, and with Lina for having betrayed him into an exhibition of sentiment which placed him in a false and uncomfortable position. To flirt with Lina was all well and pleasant enough, and

there was no harm in anything he had said or done. She knew what he meant; but to be discovered by his wife, who did not know, in the very act of flirtation was far from agreeable. As for Lina, her cheeks were a little redder than usual, but otherwise she showed no sign of embarrassment. She had too keen a sense of the ridiculous not to be inwardly amused at George's discomfiture. She began mentally to concoct, with a slight variation from the original, a version of the episode, which should tickle the ears of the Bishop—her father confessor—and she did not care sufficiently about George to feel the position tragic.

“I am sorry to have interrupted you,” said Esther, her voice deepened by contempt. “I did not know that my husband was here, or I would not have come in unannounced.”

“I don't know why you came at all,” growled George. “The horses had a long drive yesterday, and you know that I don't like them taken any distance without my knowledge.”

“That *is* so like a man,” said Lina. He keeps a pair of carriage-horses for his wife's benefit; and then grumbles because she takes them out without his permission. Oh! I hope that when I am married I shall be allowed to go and see my friends in my own carriage without being scolded

by the Bishop. Esther, you sweet, comforting person, I am so delighted to see you. George was getting quite, *quite* melodramatic, and you know, my love, that my poor little soul is not equal to melodrama. Level, commonplace solidity suits it much the best. That bad boy really presumes upon his cousinship to the most abominable extent. Now, I appeal to you, dearest—as a wife. Would the Bishop's feelings have been lacerated, or his digestion impaired, by the sight of George kissing my hand? Dear creature! He has embraced my paws many times before now"—looking down at her ringed little fingers—"but still one must try and grasp the position from Mrs. Grundy's point of view."

Esther looked at Lina in a bewildered way. She did not know how to answer her. Then she glanced at George with a quiet scorn in her face, of which she was unconscious, but which he saw and resented. As Lina turned her back under the pretext of bringing forward a chair, he seized Esther's arm so violently as almost to hurt her, and whispered in a low, wrathful tone: "What the —— do you mean? I see that you are working up for a scene, and I don't intend to have one. Do you hear?"

"George," said Lina, "that is right. Take off Esther's jacket, and put her muff down.

And now, dear, come and rest your feet on the fender, and we'll have some tea. Oh, how should I exist if the tea-plantations failed, or if there were a sudden collapse in the coal supply? I'm as bad as the old women in the work-house. 'Give us our drop o' summat warm, Miss Lina, and our bit of fire, and that's all the likes of us wants to make us comfortable.' Are you wondering how George got here, Esther?"

"No," replied Esther.

"Roadster has gone dead lame," said George, recovering himself a little. "It's all that fool Will's fault; I told him the horse wasn't fit to go out to-day."

"So, you see," continued Lina, "it was lucky that you turned up, or George would have had to borrow a mount for himself or his groom from father. There's nothing makes the darling old boy so edgy as being asked to lend a horse. He resigns himself with Christian fortitude and an air of 'sharing my last coat between us twain,' but the martyrdom is painfully evident."

Lina rattled on, not at all disconcerted by the silence of her guests. The faculty of small talk is an enviable one upon occasions. Then there was an interval of tea-drinking, and afterwards George went out to the stables to inspect the horses.

"Esther," said Lina, when they were alone, "your entrance in that sudden fashion had really a most tragi-comic effect. Your great, surprised eyes took in the tableau quite seriously. Don't be serious, darling. Burlesque becomes horribly dank and frousty when it is tortured into melodrama. The Mrs. Grundy *rôle* does not become you, you nice, abstract person. It is George's way to be rather effusive, and if it comforts the dear creature he is very welcome to spoon me. We were brought up together, you know."

"Yes," said Esther, mechanically.

"I'll give you leave to flirt as much as you like with the Bishop, dear. It is settled, you know. Mother went off this afternoon, brimful of sacerdotal importance, to impart the news to her choicest friends. Think of the privilege, dearest Esther, of being mother-in-law to one of the Lord's Anointed. . . ."

"You see, dear," went on Lina, not concerned at Esther's gravity—"I'm rather like the princess in a fairy story I read the other day, who had no gravitation. It would never have done for a flighty, ramshackly creature like me to marry any one but a person of weight—moral and physical. Now no one can dispute that the Bishop, if neither versatile nor brilliant, is sound. *I* shall

form our joint opinions, and my Lord will give them forth to the world, qualified by a note of interrogation of approval which will impart to them a new commercial value. I think that I can hear the Bishop remarking solemnly, ‘It takes a long time before a young woman settles down.’ He’ll say the same thing five minutes later of a new importation of claret in his cellar.”

“Esther,” said George, raspingly, as he re-entered the room, “the carriage is ready, and if you have finished your tea we had better start. Another time I must beg that you will not take the horses a long distance without consulting me first. The bay is certain to be lame to-morrow. Esther rose and put on her jacket, without having said a word about the Hunt Ball, the object of her visit. Lina kissed her affectionately, gushed over her, and wrapped her up, coming to the hall-door to see the start.

When they were alone in the brougham George’s anger burst forth.

“What did you mean by creeping in upon us in that sneaking fashion? Why couldn’t you let the butler announce you?”

“I did not know that you were there,” replied Esther, in a high, hard tone—“and if I had known it, I could not have supposed that you

would object to my coming in upon you un-
awares."

"I object to prying of any kind," said George. "I see that you are trying to ride the high horse, but you are greatly mistaken if you fancy that you are going to have everything your own way. You have always been jealous of Lina Welby. I believe that you came to Allerton on the extreme sudden this afternoon, because you had an idea that I should be there, and I call it sneaking conduct."

Esther drew herself back into the corner of the carriage; her eyes glistened resentfully, but she maintained a proud silence which irritated George more than words.

"Well! Are you dumb? Have you nothing to say for yourself?"

"What should I have to say?" cried Esther, blazing round upon him with a passion of which he had not believed her capable. "It is not I who have to excuse myself. I should scorn myself if I stooped to deny your accusation. Do you think that *I* would pry upon you, and dog you because I was jealous? It is only low-minded women who are jealous of men whom they *love*, but when one does not even care! Do you believe that I could insult my husband by suspecting him? You goad me into speaking—

you make me despise you—you teach me to be indifferent. . . Worse than that—sometimes to hate you.”

“You mean me to understand,” said George, more calmly than she had expected him to receive such a revelation of her feelings, and this phase in his demeanour stung her to new scorn; “you mean me to understand that you dislike me. Very well. If division comes between us, remember that you were the first to make it. As for what you saw to-day,—you may go and proclaim it to the whole world, for anything that I care. There is no harm in my kissing my cousin Lina’s hand, or her lips either, for that matter.”

“I have not said that there is any harm.”

“Then why do you put on such confounded tragedy airs? I don’t want to quarrel over nothing. I am willing to forget what you have said. Why do you keep aloof from me like that? Come, give me a kiss and make it up.”

He put out his arm to draw her towards him, but Esther made a movement of resistance, and shrank further back into the corner of the carriage.

“Don’t touch me,” she cried.

“You refuse to let me kiss you,” said George, with slow concentrated wrath.

Esther threw her hands over her face. "I can't. Don't ask me."

George flung himself violently away from her, and Esther trembled, frightened, yet powerless to combat the feeling of repulsion, the same which had come over her in Rome. "Remember," said George deliberately, "whatever comes of this, you only are to blame. It is you who have always held yourself aloof from me when I have wished to forget and forgive our little quarrels. I have never borne malice, but you have always been cold and resentful for days afterwards. I don't reproach myself in the least. I have done what I could to make you happy. I married you as few fellows would have done, without a penny, and with a stigma upon your name. I have given you everything, and have sacrificed my life to you because I was fool enough to fall in love with you. I bitterly repent the bargain, and I wish to God I had never seen you."

The bold declaration, as it fell remorselessly from George's lips, sent a shiver through Esther's frame. The very worst that could happen had befallen her. After this avowal she felt that she and her husband could never again live in even the semblance of union. All their married life had been a hateful mockery, and now the

mask had dropped off, and could never be reassumed so as to cheat either of them into contentment. Though Esther had told herself many times, in moments of angry bitterness, that George repented having married her, he had never in so many deliberate words confirmed her suspicions. All through, their frequent misunderstandings had been followed, upon his part, by paroxysms of remorseful tenderness which had somewhat nullified the impression his violent wrath had at first made. But now there could be no doubt to dilute the bitterness, and as if to make assurance doubly sure George continued :

“It shows what idiots men are when they allow themselves to be caught by a pretty face. I had the whole world before me to choose from. I might have married a girl who suited me, with money and good connections ; and instead of that I must needs pitch away all my chances in a fit of sentimental folly, for the sake of a creature picked up, as it were, out of a gutter—a creature without even a name—the daughter of a forger, whose mother was a ——”

As George pronounced the degrading epithet, Esther uttered a deep cry like the last moan of a goaded animal. “What do you mean ?” she gasped. “What right have you to insult me so ? It is brutal of you to taunt a woman—a woman

who cannot defend herself. But this is too much—My mother! my dead mother!”

There flashed through Esther's mind the recollection of her interview with George beside her mother's grave when he had offered to be her friend, and she had accepted him as such, almost believing him to be a messenger sent by heaven to comfort her in her loneliness. A curious current of sympathy, such as that which links for a moment two minds in almost every respect antagonistic, recalled the same scene to George's memory. He saw Esther again as he had seen her then, in her ill-fitting, cotton gown, slim and childish, with her pale, dreamy, face and the tears wet on her lashes, as she had sat upon the little mound, her eyes turned towards the sea, while the setting sun lit up behind her a landscape as desolate and solitary as appeared the girl's own life. George's impulses either of anger, remorse, or tenderness followed quickly upon each other. The words, “Esther forgive me; I did not mean to hurt you,” passed his lips, but she hardly heeded his apology.

“I don't care what you say of me. You have hurt me too deeply to make it of any consequence how much more pain you give me; but there are some things which I cannot bear tamely. I cannot hear my dead mother insulted. Only a

coward could have uttered such words. Retract them at once, and tell me that you know they are false.”

“They are true,” said George, with the instinct of self-vindication. “I am sorry now that I said what I did, but you angered me beyond control. Perhaps now that you know what you are—what your mother was—you may feel a little gratitude to me for having given you a name.”

“Who told you?” asked Esther.

“The person who told me did not mean that you should be informed. I suppose that I have betrayed confidence; but any one who knew me would understand that I cannot bridle my tongue when I am angry. I hate mysteries and concealments and promises to be mum. It is all utter rot. Things go much more smoothly when people know their position. It was Lydyiard who told me—before I married you. He is the best authority you could have—for the simple reason that your mother was his wife before she became your father’s mistress.”

“Oh, hush!” she exclaimed shrinking from the bold statement, which seemed conclusive enough to stab with a hitherto unfelt pain. “If it is true, and you don’t want to hurt me more, be silent.” She shut her eyes, and seemed to see in her imagination the past all over again. It had

a new meaning now. In the immediate perspective Lydyiard's interest in, and tenderness to, herself; the discovery of her mother's picture in his room; the vague hints in the letter, which he had given her, and his words at the time. And then, going further back—her mother's patient bearing of her voluntary yoke—all the suffering sadness and proud reserve in her manner, and her face—the perpetual galling of past obligations—the deep remorse. Everything that had vaguely puzzled Esther before, became clear to her now. "I am glad that I did not marry Bernard," her heart cried.

The disgrace was deeper than she had dreamed.

George watched her, alarmed at what he had done. Annoyed at circumstances—angry with her—angry with himself—yet pitiful of her evident pain, and remorsefully anxious to atone by tender words, which, in her present mood, he dared not utter. He was like an impetuous child, who in a fit of rage has broken a toy with which he has become provoked, and who contemplates with dismay the wreck before him.

Esther sat still and silent in the corner of the carriage, at first with her eyes closed, and when she opened them, she did not look at him, but turned her face away towards the dusky highway with its lines of bristling hedge above which the

naked thorn-bushes rose at regular, monotonous intervals. What was she thinking of? George at that moment would have given almost anything to know, but he dared not ask.

"Mousie," he said softly; but she took no notice, and he leaned back silent again, and let his thoughts go slipping past his immediate worry to the events of the day—the run—Roadster's lameness, and the scolding he meant to give Wills, who should have known better. What does a gentleman keep a stud groom for, if it be not to take accurate measure of the capabilities of his horses? His wrath against his wife was all spent now. He was sorry and ashamed. Had she been any one but his wife he would have felt himself in an extremely awkward, uncomfortable position; but being his chattel, and accessible to his personal influence, the quarrel could not be irremediable. He would appeal to her tenderness and wifely duty, and they would make it up. He was sorry, bitterly sorry, that he had hurt her feelings by speaking disrespectfully of her mother, but the words could not be unsaid; and when a thing was irretrievable, it was George's way, after a fit of impotent wrath, followed by remorse as inefficacious, to let it slide past him into the misty shadows of memory.

The way was long, and the winter afternoon

short. It was quite dark in the avenue, where the bare branches of the elms interlaced; and the lights twinkling brightly in the windows of Grately were a relief to his mind. It was like dropping the curtain upon a harrowing melodrama, and coming back to pleasant every day life again. Nothing could have departed very far from its usual course, with the immediate prospect of his familiar butler opening the door, and of a glowing fire, and luxurious meal awaiting him.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "I had quite forgotten. I asked old Eyre to dine to-night. "Mousie," he said, as he helped her out of the carriage, "how cold you are! Curtis, get Mrs. Brand a glass of port wine before she goes upstairs." The pet name came quite naturally with the gush of reaction. He had almost forgotten that he had said anything unkind, or that he had been angry.

He stooped to feel the horse's legs, and asked the coachman a question or two. "See that you bandage the bay well," Esther heard him say, as she went up the wide, softly-carpeted oak staircase. Her maid was waiting in her bedroom, and the firelight was shining upon the silver ornaments upon her dressing-table, and upon the satin gown laid out upon the couch for her to

put on. Her pretty, furred dressing-gown and dainty slippers were warming before the fire.

"I don't know whether I have laid out the right things, ma'am," said the maid.

Esther smiled bitterly to herself at the grim irony of commonplace, as though, in this phase of mental suffering through which she was passing, it mattered what gown she wore, or whether a horse's legs were bandaged.

She put off going down-stairs till the second gong had sounded, but Mr. Eyre was late, and contrary to her expectations she found herself alone in the drawing-room with her husband. George was turning over the leaves of a *Punch* as he sat in a large arm-chair beside a little table that bore the softly-shaded lamp. Esther walked up to the fire-place, and stood against the mantel-piece, her face on a level with the Dresden china figures upon it. Her eyes wandered aimlessly round the desert of glass, gilding, china, and cold, comfortless grandeur. This room had never seemed to her like home, and the thought struck her, how little it would cost to give it all up, and to bury herself in some quiet place where she would be free.

It was not that she craved the forest solitude of her girlhood, or liberty to come and go how and where she would. She had none of that

Bohemian longing for freedom of action which one often finds in those persons who have breathed in their early lives, an unconventional atmosphere ; but she desired, with all the strength of her nature, escape from those intangible moral fetters and responsibilities which galled and held her down. Could she not throw them off in a resolute effort to blind herself to after-consequences ? Surely a contract could be no longer binding when both wished it dissolved. Had not her husband told her in a few plain, deliberately-spoken words that he deeply regretted having married her ; and if this was his feeling, was not every crumb she ate the food of dependence and degradation ? Why should she not go ? If she left him of her own accord George could never more throw in her teeth that she, a bastard, a penniless, despised creature, had no right to be a great county lady, living in a fine house, and enjoying the material good things for which she had been bought and had not made an adequate return. She would show him that she despised what he had given her, and that poverty had no terrors for her.

George watched her over the pages of his *Punch*, and wondered what was in her mind. He could see that it was not moving in the circle in which he would wish it to travel, and a vague fear smote him that she was contemplating some

decided course of action. He began to have some comprehension of the chasm that yawned between them; and he would gladly have cried *peccavi* could he have blotted out the events of the afternoon.

“Hang it!” he muttered to himself, “she ought to know that I did not mean to give her pain. Are you cold, Mousie?” he asked as a preliminary to reconciliatory overtures.

“No,” replied Esther.

“You look white and cold. Mousie, I am sorry that I annoyed you this afternoon. Won’t you forgive me?”

His words touched no answering chord of softness. In her present mood Esther would have preferred him to be cold or angry. She could not understand these rapid transitions from one humour to another. It was inconceivable to her that George should say designedly that he repented his marriage without really meaning his statement, and if such were the case, no after apologetic words could nullify or alter it.

“You might have spoken more kindly,” said Esther quietly; “but if what you said was true, and I cannot doubt that it was so, there is no need to ask my forgiveness. I feel,” she added, “that I owe you much, that you were disinterested in marrying me knowing what you did—that I

ought to thank you for giving me a name when I had none—but you have made the burden of my obligations too heavy for me. It would be sweet to me if I could throw them off.”

The door-bell rang and there was the sound of Mr. Eyre’s admission.

“I beseech you,” murmured Esther, hurriedly, “to leave me in peace for to-night. Don’t come near me ; don’t talk to me ; I have borne much to-day. I feel that I cannot endure more.”

“Mr. Eyre,” announced Curtis ; and there was the assumption of the mask again, the putting on of company smiles and manners, like the horrid tricking up of a corpse.

Esther did not wait in the drawing-room for the re-entrance of the gentlemen, but left a message, excusing herself on the plea of fatigue, and retired to her own room. As soon as was practicable she dismissed her maid, and locked her own door, and that one which communicated with her husband’s dressing-room. As she sat through the dreary farce of dinner, a resolve had been shaping itself in her mind. George had quoted Lydyiard as his authority. She could not disbelieve his statement about her mother, and she recalled Lydyiard’s offer of help should she be in perplexity or trouble. What greater trouble could ever assail her than that in which she was

now? She determined that she would go to Mr. Lydyiard and ask his advice. She felt instinctively that he would be upon her side, and that if there were any moral right to be urged in favour of her desire to quit her husband, he would aid her to freedom. Freedom!—that was now the governing impulse in her mind.

She began deliberately to plan her mode of action, calculating her husband's movements as far as she knew them. Upon the morrow there was a magistrates' meeting at Woodchester. She had heard him announce his intention of attending it. This would necessitate his early departure and late return. During his absence she would leave Grately, and find her way to Mr. Lydyiard's chambers.

So far her plans assumed definite shape; but after that her mind was blank, except for the mastering longing for independence.

CHAPTER VIII.

“I WANT TO BE FREE.”

ABOUT two o'clock upon the following day, Esther found herself standing at the door of Mr. Lydyiard's chambers. Everything had happened as she had expected it would. George had left her undisturbed, and had started to attend his magistrates' meeting before she was up.

Soon after his departure Esther rose, and ordered the carriage to take her to Coombe, their station, to catch the up train to London at eleven o'clock. Curtis looked surprised when his mistress said quietly to him, as she made a pretence of eating her breakfast: “I am going to London on unexpected business. Give this note to your master when he comes back;” and the ladies'-maid expressed some astonishment when Esther intimated that she would not be required to accompany her. She wonderingly packed a small portmanteau with a change of linen, as her mistress ordered. No evening dresses, and no

jewellery ! The freak was freely discussed over the servants' eleven o'clock bread and cheese and beer ; but there was no explanation offered.

In her note to George, Esther merely said that she had gone to London for a day or two, as under the present circumstances she could not feel happy at Grately. She begged that he would not follow her, and promised to write at greater length upon the morrow.

The housekeeper who opened Mr. Lydyiard's door, informed Esther that her master was not in London ; that he had been ailing for some time, and had been ordered to Bournemouth for change of air, and that she did not know when he would return.

"To Bournemouth !" repeated Esther, blankly, her heart sinking within her at this sudden check to her plan of operations. She stood a moment on the doorstep considering. "I will write to Mr. Lydyiard," she said, presently. "Will you please have my portmanteau taken off the cab?—and if you will give me your master's address, I will go up to his sitting-room and write my letter there."

The servant, a prim, neatly dressed person, did as she was bidden, but eyed the forlorn lady with some little suspicion. Esther had taken off her gloves to get money from her purse for the

cabman, and the woman glanced at her left hand, reassured by the presence of the wedding-ring.

"Oh!" cried Esther, observing her hesitation; "I forgot. You don't know me. I am Mrs. Brand, an old friend of Mr. Lydyiard's. You need not feel uneasy at letting me in."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said the woman; "I remember having seen your photograph in my master's room. He will be sorry that you are disappointed at finding him away. Will you walk upstairs, if you please. Perhaps you'd like to rest, and I can get you a cup of tea, or anything you might wish for."

She led the way into the drawing-room upon the first floor; and while she lingered, setting the fire alight and placing writing materials before the newcomer, the door-bell rang, and she ran down to answer the summons. Before Esther had begun to write her letter the woman returned with a pink paper in her hand.

"There's no need for you to write, ma'am," she said. "I have this moment had a telegram from Mr. Lydyiard. He will be back from Bournemouth this afternoon about five o'clock. And it's late for him to travel," she added, "with his bad cough—but gentlemen are so careless about themselves."

Esther was too much relieved to heed the

latter part of the sentence. Occupied with her own trouble, she had barely taken in what the housekeeper had previously said about Mr. Lydyiard's ill-health.

"I am glad," she murmured; "I should have been sorry to miss him, and will wait here till he comes."

Then she turned so pale that the woman inquired: "Can I do anything for you, ma'am?—I am afraid that you are tired. Perhaps you would like to lie down upon the sofa, and I will bring you a glass of wine and a biscuit; or in case you have had no lunch—for one often forgets to eat when one is travelling—I could get you something more substantial if you wished."

Esther accepted the offer of the wine, but though she had eaten nothing since breakfast, declined any further nourishment. The housekeeper arranged the pillows of the sofa, and threw a rug over her feet, hanging about for several minutes upon one pretence or another. At last she went away, saying, "I have drawn the blinds, but I am afraid you'll find the street noisy. Mr. Lydyiard used to declare that he liked the bustle, but even he finds it too much for his head now;" and Esther was left to herself.

Later in the afternoon a gentleman walked

briskly up by the Embankment, and rang Lydyiard's bell. It was Bernard.

"Has Mr. Lydyiard come back yet, Mrs. Bridges?" he inquired.

"No, sir," answered the woman who had admitted Esther, and to whom Bernard was familiar; "but I had a telegram from him a short time ago saying that he would be here this afternoon. It was lucky it arrived when it did, for a lady had come up from the country wanting to see my master, and was just going to write to him. She seemed disappointed at his being away."

"A lady!" repeated Bernard wonderingly, for Lydyiard's circle of feminine acquaintance was not extensive.

"Leastways, I hope she is a lady," said Mrs. Bridges, correcting herself. "She looked very quiet, but one never can tell. I let her in, and she is up in the drawing-room. Do you know anything about her, sir? She calls herself Mrs. Brand, and I have seen her photograph in Mr. Lydyiard's room. I don't know whether she has come to stay, but there's her luggage."

Bernard glanced at the modest portmanteau. "Is she alone?"

"Yes, sir; not so much as a maid with her."

"I know Mrs. Brand," said Bernard, the name sticking in his throat as he uttered it. "She is

an old friend of Mr. Lydyiard's, and of mine. It's all right. Did you say that she was in the drawing-room? I'll run up and see her. No; you need not come. I don't want to be announced."

He went quickly upstairs, the image of Esther filling his mind, and the longing to speak to her shutting out every other consideration. Some women have the attribute of individualization in the minds of those who have at any time been interested in them. Esther possessed it in a high degree. Bernard's heart could never, under any circumstances, have beat so wildly at the prospect of a meeting with Frederica. He did not pause to reflect upon the possible imprudence of entering Esther's presence unannounced. He only felt that she was there, and that whatever might come of the interview, he must see her.

Though Bernard's passions, when roused, were stronger than those of most men, he was not naturally impetuous, or prone to be carried away by excited longing. He rather piqued himself upon his cool reasonableness and self-control, perhaps because he had never yet been severely tempted. There was no question in his mind, at the moment, of disloyalty to his betrothed. Had he waited to deliberately analyze his feelings he would have acted in precisely the same manner;

for he would have told himself that it was weak and cowardly in a man to shun a woman for the reason that he had loved her, and that circumstances had now made it impossible for him to cherish his love.

He opened the drawing-room door softly. A yellow fog was growing dense outside, and the room seemed all in shadow except where the coal fire shed a glow upon Esther's figure, as, bending forward from the arm-chair in which she had seated herself, she courted the warmth.

She had taken off her bonnet and cloak, and her small, pale face and tender outline of cheek and throat were clearly defined against the red light. Bernard had thought her changed when they had last met at Allerton, but now she seemed ten times more altered. There was a furrow of pain between her brows, and a hopeless droop at the corners of her mouth. Her eyes shone larger and softer than ever from hollow sockets. She had pushed away her hair from her forehead, and one arm resting upon her knee supported her chin. Somehow her very attitude and expression conveyed swiftly to Bernard the impression that she was in grief and perplexity.

Bernard approached her, and was standing almost before her, ere she became aware of his presence. She had been thinking of him, and

yet he was the very last person whom she expected to see. Her nerves were in such a state of tension that it was impossible for her to greet him composedly. She gave a violent start and rose trembling, uttering a cry of surprise: "Oh Bernard!"

He took her hand and looked into her face with searching eyes, which seemed as though they would read her heart. "Something is the matter, Esther. Something has happened. What is it?"

"Nothing," she began nervously, trying to recover herself. "I am foolish and easily startled, and you came in so suddenly. I am waiting here for Mr. Lydyard. I came up this morning from Grately. I wanted to see—to consult him."

"Why Lydyard?" asked Bernard searchingly.

Esther felt that she could not bear his gaze. She rose and moved away from him, but self-control was more difficult to maintain when she knew that he was looking at her, while she could not meet his eyes. "I don't know," she answered, with a kind of recklessness. "I suppose because I have no one else. He has always been kind to me."

Her tone, perhaps because it was one unusual to her, seemed to Bernard to put them at a less distance from each other. He had had before,

the dividing sense of her marriage, which had always brought up an unpleasant image of Brand as a part of her spiritual consciousness with which he could have no sympathy. He saw by her face that she was in distress, and her manner conveyed subtly to him that it was distress of a kind which implied a less amount of self-restraint, and a carelessness of what her husband or others might think or feel. There was a note of appeal in the way in which she said, "He has always been kind to me," as though she had of late found others less than kind. Had she quarrelled with her husband? This was the thought which flashed directly into Bernard's mind. Without having any exact data of facts or conversation to go upon, Bernard had arrived at the conclusion that George Brand was a swaggering, empty-headed bully. That Esther could have loved and married him, had infused into his estimation of her a particle of contempt. This had been partly effaced by the interview in the conservatory at Allerton, but her broken admissions then had left no definite impression upon his mind, except that she was not happy. For the first time, he had begun then to suspect that she had had another reason than preference for George, for refusing him—Bernard. Now he felt almost certain that they had both been

victims to some necessity, real or imagined, which had held them apart.

"Esther," he said, "you speak as though you were reproaching some one. I don't know whom you have any right to reproach, or who has been making you unhappy. Would I not have been kind to you, more than kind, if you would have let me?"

Esther was silent. There was a choking in her throat as she struggled against the longing to lay aside all reserve, that was getting the better of her. The craving she felt was not that of a lonely woman to be assured of love. It was rather a child-like yearning for sympathy and support in her mental trouble and uncertainty. It came across her with a kind of hopeless conviction that it would have been better had she been open with Bernard from the first, and allowed him to choose what their lives should be. She had utterly failed in the purpose that had governed her. She had not made George happy as she had intended. Bernard had not married Frederica. She had only succeeded in heaping misery upon herself, and in embittering two other lives. Self-repression had borne no good fruit. Perhaps it had been altogether wrong and unnecessary. Life seemed a web of clueless endeavour. What was the use trying to unravel it? And all this

time, though she kept her face averted, she was conscious that Bernard was looking at her with questioning love in his eyes.

The silence lasted for several moments. Bernard felt that he must break it, and he did so with a reference to the subject that was hateful to him. "Is your husband with you in town?"

"No," replied Esther; "I came alone. I left home suddenly. He does not know that I am here. He does not know anything, except that I am in London."

"Do you return to-night?"

"I don't know. I don't know what I am going to do."

"Esther," exclaimed Bernard, "there is something wrong with you, I am sure. Why should you come up suddenly from Grately to consult Mr. Lydyiard, unless you have quarrelled with your husband; and if so, what is Mr. Lydyiard to you? Sir Emilius is the proper person to give you help or advice, if you need it."

"I cannot go to Sir Emilius," said Esther slowly; "I have no claim upon him. He would not help me, or understand me."

"Could not *I* understand you?" said Bernard suddenly. "What is the use," he went on with some of his old imperiousness, "in covering up

your feelings, and trying to hide them from me ? Surely you can trust me. Why should we both be made wretched by your reserve, when I feel that it is in your heart to speak ? Come ; be open with me."

Esther still kept silence, her eyes fixed upon the fire. Once she half-moved towards him, and there crossed her face that sudden flash which precedes self-revelation, but it died out again.

"Perhaps I annoy you," said Bernard, shortly and bitterly. "You misunderstand me if you think that I want to force myself upon your confidence. I had better go, and leave you to yourself. You have never trusted me. You were not open with me when candour might have spared us both suffering. I would not trouble you now, if your vague admissions had not made me think that there is something in the background which I do not understand ; and if I could help feeling for you in a way that makes you different to all other women in the world to me. I am sorry to have to own it, but it is so, and you must know it. But you are as unreliable and inconsistent as the rest of your sex. It is like a woman, to half-reveal her trouble, and torture with indefinite avowals, while with a Jesuitic sort of casuistry, she adheres to

the letter of her code of reticence. A man would speak out, and put a stop to misunderstanding and wretchedness."

"I will speak out," cried Esther suddenly, forced into looking at him. "Why should I care what I say now? If I was silent before, it was from a feeling of loyalty—but, other people are not deterred from giving pain by any scruple of that kind. They do not mind; why should I? Why should I try to be any better—any different? No one thinks of any one but themselves. I see now that I only make people miserable. No one understands. I don't. I don't understand myself. It is not the giving up that makes one's wretchedness, but the knowing that those who are dearest misjudge one's motives. I wish now that I had spoken plainly—that I had let you choose. If it was impossible it would have been better that you should have known that I—that I did care."

Bernard put out his hands and caught Esther's, and they stood facing each other with their fingers clasped.

"My own!" he said very low, with a passion in his voice that made it seem unlike Bernard's. "You were my own the whole time. I was not mistaken. You had some Quixotic notion of honour—of loyalty to the man you married—

which made you send me away? Dearest, be honest with me. Don't conceal anything now. It is as though we were speaking to each other over a grave."

"I had promised him," said Esther, her hands still in his, looking up at him in her childlike way, with the tears beading her lashes, and a suppressed sob in her voice. "I will tell you how it was, as nearly as I can. I don't want to keep anything from you. I had given myself to him long ago—on the island. I did love him then. I felt that it was wicked to try and loose oneself from the past—from what one has taken upon oneself—when it seems to cling round one and bind one like a fate. I thought that a woman ought to be true to one man. I remembered my mother. You don't know her story. She was false, and she was punished. I did not know then quite *what* she had been; but it was enough to make me afraid of being like her—of being miserable, as she was. I thought that I could make him happy—"

Esther paused, the sob in her voice breaking it. Bernard pressed her hands.

"It was not only of him and of myself that I thought. There was something about another person too: everything seemed to draw me away from you. And you said—do you remember on

the bridge at Barwold?—that you would not marry a woman who inherited shame ; and I was disgraced. You said that you had given up the American girl whom you loved, because her father had done dishonourable things—and my father had been transported for forgery. He was a drunkard. You said that a man had a higher duty than mere personal pleasure. I did not understand I could not reason, but I wished to spare you the pain of deciding—again—I wanted to be true—to others”

Bernard drew her by his tightening grasp a little nearer to him, and Esther went on, her words following a mental sequence which he did not understand, and her eyes downcast :

“ He knew it all—he did not mind. That seemed to bind me more, so that I felt as though I owed myself. I did not know what it really meant—to be married—to belong to another person, so that one had barely a right to one’s own thoughts. . . . I did not think that it would be so difficult to do one’s duty, and to be loving. I tried, but I could not help being cold sometimes, and that made him angry. It seemed as though I were fighting against my very self ; and he could not understand what I felt. It was like being sold body and soul. . . . And then when he reproached me for the little I had

given him, in return for all he had given me ! It was not that I cared for money or a fine house. I had given him myself—and he thought he had made a bad bargain, and was sorry that he had not married—some one else—who had money, and whom he liked."

"Have you left him, Esther?" asked Bernard hoarsely. "The coward ! the cur !"

"He was always sorry afterwards for anything he had said to hurt me. He could not help showing what he felt. There was justice, too, in his reasoning. It is his nature to be angry—to say things that wound and rankle, and then to forget them."

"Have you left him?" repeated Bernard.

"I want to go—I want to go!" cried Esther, with a fervour that bewildered Bernard's judgment, and plunged him into a rushing tide of possibilities. The "might have beens" of his imagination changed into the dangerous, impelling "may be's." Esther's next words scarcely arrested him. "If it would be right—I will go back again if I ought—if I must—but I feel as though I could not bear it."

"You have no need to bear it, Esther," said Bernard. "There is a way of escape."

There was an eager child-like relief in her face as she answered : "I feel as though I should

not mind what I did if only I could be free. To wander without money or food would be better than the inner knowledge that I was like the wicked women who are bought. . . . Surely, when he wishes that our marriage were broken, there can be nothing to bind me. I should be a sham and a lie in his house. I am doubly disgraced—my mother—how can I say it? I had no name before he gave me his. My mother was some one else's wife—she was not married to my father."

Bernard let Esther's hands drop, more in the shock of surprise than from any personal recoil from the revelation; but she, interpreting his action differently, sank into a chair and covered her face.

"You see it is what I said. I am disgraced—I am not fit to be married to any one."

"Esther," said Bernard, "you cannot live alone if you leave your husband. You must be dependent upon some one."

"I will not ask anything of Sir Emilius," cried Esther; "and I will not take my husband's money. To eat bread that he had bought would be to feel that I was still defrauding him."

"You are full of false pride," continued Bernard. "You do not consider that in marriage the question of material obligation is degrading to both."

"Do I not know it? Have I not felt the bitterness of such degradation? But it would not be so with those who loved each other. Love makes everything equal."

Bernard walked away from where Esther sat, and stood at the window looking out upon the busy street, which seemed every moment to grow mistier in the fog. It would be wrong to say that he was thinking. His mind had been turned completely off its balance, and he was no more able to grasp his own, or Esther's, true position, than a free-thinker, in imminent danger of violent death, is capable of analyzing, in an elaborate process of reasoning, the scientific possibilities of post-mortem existence.

Our dearest and loftiest theories have, when confronted with passionate individual experience, a humiliating knack of levelling themselves to our desires. So now, Bernard, who in a calmer mood would have ticked off a hundred reasons not based upon religion or abstract morality, against the expediency of running away with one's neighbour's wife, felt inclined to fulminate denunciations of the bondage of circumstance, and the narrow dogmatism of a social creed, which defined, with such unreasonable sharpness, the relative positions of the sexes.

Frederica, and the new obligation which the

thought of her implied, did not rise to his mind. She had not yet sufficiently incorporated herself into his life to make her image felt as a determining influence in a supreme moment like this. Bernard's strongest impulse then was to go to Esther, and ask her to share his life regardless of everything else. A flow of entreaty and argument rose to his lips. He raised his head with that upward movement of his chin that expressed with him irritated resolve, and advanced towards her.

As Bernard approached, Esther looked up and met the excited desire which his eyes expressed. She had never before realized the meaning of passion in its supreme phase. She had fancied at those moments when she had revolted against the ardent demonstrativeness of George's love, that her insensibility was due to a peculiarity of her idiosyncrasy, which made her colder than the generality of women. She did not even now comprehend the flame which was kindled within her.

There was the sudden, bewildering revelation of susceptibilities of which she had never dreamed—of a state of being in which she too might have tasted those joys common to daughters of earth to whom Fate had been kinder than to herself. . . .

Esther rose from her chair with a cry, and

almost staggered in her excitement at the glimpse of unrealizable possibilities which had been momentarily opened to her. It was the movement of one who has been blind and who sees. . . . But with the flash of comprehension came also the keen sense of hopelessness.

"Esther," whispered Bernard, "there is a way of escape. . . . You have no ties which may not be broken. . . . Nothing binds you to your husband but your marriage vows, which are a mockery."

Esther looked at him with the startled gaze of a child, which does not quite comprehend what is patent to a more matured understanding. Then her eyelids fell, and she crimsoned all over, the blush spreading from her face to her neck. "I—I cannot,"—she said in a gasp. "There are ties . . . there is . . . there may be—I—Oh! I am a woman . . . I feel—I cannot."

Bernard had stretched out his arm to draw Esther into his embrace, his passionate impulse half-arrested by the broken words which fell from her lips—half-inflamed by the deep blush which overspread her face, and revealed the presence of an agitating spiritual consciousness, new, and but vaguely understood.

But the order of commonplace events, which is so often a deterrent to individual action or emotion, spared them both from self-committal

and its after-consequences. Before Bernard had addressed Esther the door-bell rang loudly, and there was the confused sound of steps, and of luggage being brought into the hall. It was only Mr. Lydyiard's arrival, which, after all, had been perfectly calculable. They drew apart from each other and waited, listening, to the sound of a laboured ascent, and then the drawing-room door opened and Lydyiard entered, arrested on the threshold by a violent fit of coughing.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. LYDYIARD AS PEACEMAKER.

MRS. BRIDGES had followed her master upstairs with an air of anxiety, and while he was still in the paroxysm of coughing that had seized him upon his entrance, she lighted the candles upon the walls and the chimney-piece, replenished the fire, and drew the curtains of the windows.

“Oh, sir!” she exclaimed. “It is enough to make anybody who has a care for your health angry. You should not have travelled so late in the day; and then to come from the station in a hansom with the windows up, and such a fog as there is in the streets! You’d like to kill yourself.”

In spite of Lydyiard’s reserved ways, he always inspired affection in the breasts of those who served him, and Mrs. Bridges, remonstrance was full of genuine solicitude and alarm. He waved her gently away and seated himself beside the table, his eye falling for the first time on the two figures by the fire-place.

Esther had not seen him since her marriage, at which he had been present, and was shocked at the alteration a year had made in his appearance. He looked smaller, and more bent and wizened than ever. The bones in his cheeks were prominent. His grizzled hair hung sparsely over his forehead, and his eyes seemed to shine out of caverns. She rushed to him and took his hand, forgetting Bernard, her embarrassment, almost her trouble, in concern for his health.

"Oh, you have been ill!" she cried; "and you never wrote to me, or let me know that you were suffering."

Lydyiard looked pleased at her interest, and smiled upon her affectionately. "Why cast over your young life, my child, the shadow of my age and infirmity? And you would not have understood that I felt almost glad to be failing. There was no need to trouble you. But I did not expect to see you here—and Bernard Comyn too." He glanced sharply and questioningly from one to the other. "Has anything happened? Why are you here together?"

"We met by accident," replied Bernard shortly. "I had better go, and leave you with Mrs. Brand."

Lydyiard turned to Esther. "Is there anything wrong, Esther, with you or with your husband?"

“Yes,” murmured Esther. “I have come to you to help me.”

Lydyiard stretched out his hand to her with an unwonted softness in his eyes. “It was right of you to come to me if you are in any trouble. I will hear it, and then we shall see whether it is one that I can remedy. That is right, Bernard. Leave us now. I will talk to you another time; come to me to-morrow. You have been disappointed in your book. I knew that you would feel so; but failure is often the best medicine. You had better go and let me talk with Esther alone.”

“Good night,” said Bernard shortly. “I am sorry to see you looking so ill. You ought to go abroad.” He took Esther’s hand, and held it in his own for a moment. His heart was full of what he had been on the point of saying, words which he knew now would never be uttered. Lydyiard’s appearance on the scene had brought up before him the image of Frederica, though by what subtle chain of affinity it was difficult for him to say. Perhaps from the reason that they two—Frederica and Lydyiard—represented in his mind the world outside the circle of that passionate desire, which a moment ago had almost dominated him. A man’s impulses ebb often as rapidly as they flow, and in that short interval Bernard’s mood had changed from vehement

protest to numbed acceptance of the lot he had created for himself. He hardly dared trust himself to speak, and yet he could not leave her without a word. "You will write to me," he said in a low, pained tone. "You will let me hear from yourself what is decided for you." It was on his lips to say: "It will be better for you to go back to your husband." But he could not say it. It was as though he was deserting her. Something of this feeling was in Esther's mind too. She was being forsaken, and left to her fate. What it would be she could not fore-shadow. She had still the strong craving for emancipation, but freedom did not now represent that condition of being which her imagination had pictured. Her future was entirely misty. She hardly knew what shape she wished it to assume. She was quivering and giddy from her late excitement. There remained a glimmering consciousness that her openness with Bernard—the outcome of her need of sympathy—had been unwomanly—misleading. She had not had time to grasp the revelation, which his passion, communicating itself to her dormant sense, and fusing it into a momentary vitality—had forced upon her. The life of her passion had been brief, but its bewildering effect remained.

Poor Esther! The entrance of Lydyiard had

conveyed nothing to her intelligence of a crisis in her fate. At that moment, the universe had seemed only to contain Bernard—herself, and an indefinite consideration, which had not shaped itself into a determining influence. She realized that Bernard would depart, and her mind clutching at his presence, she longed to retain him, yet dared not look at him—dared not ask him to stay. His very tone deepened her loneliness, for it carried subtly to her understanding the sense of division. “He knows,” she said almost imploringly to Lydyiard; “he knows why I have come here.”

“He *must* go;” replied Lydyiard sternly. “Good night, Bernard.”

“Good night,” said Bernard again, and left them.

A few moments after he had gone, before either Esther or Lydyiard had spoken, Mrs. Bridges returned with a tray upon which was some bread and a basin of soup. “You must drink this, sir; you look quite exhausted; indeed, you are not fit to talk.”

Lydyiard smiled with that gentle seriousness that seemed to have come over him. “Bring another plate, Mrs. Bridges. This lady needs sustenance as much as I do. You are looking ill, Esther.”

He made her sit down to the table and insisted upon her eating and drinking with him. The warm beverage revived her numbed faculties, for, in truth, she had scarcely tasted anything that day, and was weak from inanition and excitement. The commonplace consideration of food, restored her composure, and brought her back to herself. "And now," said Lydyiard, when they had finished, drawing his chair nearer hers, "tell me what is this trouble to which you referred."

In broken words, and in much the same manner as she had related it to Bernard, though entering upon some points with necessarily fuller detail, Esther told Mr. Lydyiard the story of her married life. He grasped the meaning which she found it so difficult to convey in words, and comprehended the wretched tissue of unsuitability and misunderstanding better than Bernard had done. "You want to be free," he repeated, when she paused. "Poor child! You want to be free. You want to escape from your bonds. I understand why you shrink from your husband. I understand why your two natures will not assimilate."

He smiled when Esther went on to tell him of the visit to Allerton, and the scene she had witnessed between George and Lina Welby.

"It was not that I was jealous, or cared in

that way," said Esther hurriedly. "I had a contempt for him and for her. I would scorn to be jealous; but you don't know how terrible it is to feel that you are indebted—when you do not love—when you wish to be free—when you are goaded and reminded that you have given nothing in return. And I know now," she went on in a low voice, with her eyes downcast, "that I owe him everything—even my name. That was why I came to you. He said you had told him—about my mother."

"He said so," exclaimed Lydyiard, starting in surprise and wrath.

"It was after I had seen him with Miss Welby; when we were driving home—and he was angry. I had said that I despised him. I think I said that I hated him—I did hate him at the moment. . . . Then he told me. I don't think he meant to hurt me as he did. I think he was sorry afterwards. He wanted to make it up, and he asked me to forgive him."

"He has broken his word," said Lydyiard.

"He said that he was betraying confidence. I am sure that he was sorry; but he does not think what he says when he is angry. He is like a child in some ways. He said that he hated mysteries and concealments. I think that he was right. It would have been better if I had

known—long ago—if it is true. Mr. Lydyiard, it *is* true?”

“Yes, it is true,” answered Lydyiard; “and I told him before he married you, because I thought that it was my duty not to let him do so with eyes blindfold. I put the position before him, and he chose to go his own way.”

Lydyiard sat for a few moments in silence, and she waited for his next words. “He asked you to forgive him,” he said, at length, “and you refused?”

“I said that if it were all true, I had nothing to forgive. He could not make things different. There seemed nothing left me but the longing to escape—to free us both. I could not tell what to do—I felt powerless, and I was so wretched. I thought you would help me . . . for my mother’s sake, and so I came to you.”

Lydyiard smiled bitterly. “It was like George Brand, to buy his toy without reflection, and then to crush it in a fit of petulance, because he fancied that he had given too high a price for it. And now that it is broken, he will want it back again, and will be ready to cry like a spoiled child over what he has done. But I don’t want you to judge him too hardly. When I warned Brand of the cost of a marriage of which he had only taken into consideration the

desire to possess what he coveted at the moment, I could have prophesied that he would regret his sacrifice. You must know, Esther, that it would have seemed a sacrifice to many men. His conduct was disinterested upon the surface, and he is generous up to a certain point. If he is wanting in sensibility, he imagines others to be as blunt of feeling as himself. A Cochin China fowl which fails to comprehend the instinct of a lark to soar, is hardly to be blamed. George regards life from his own material stand-point. You, from a transcendental height to which he never could attain. In such rarified air, temperaments like his could not exist. You must descend to his level, and try to divest yourself of the fine susceptibility which makes your misery."

"Do you mean," cried Esther, stricken by the sudden fear that he also was going to misapprehend and turn against her, "that I must go back to him, and harden myself against his taunts and reproaches for having marred his life. Am I to eat and drink, and try to be happy in an animal kind of way, without minding anything else? Oh! Mr. Lydyiard, let me free. It is all I care for. I don't want his money, or his position, or any of the fine things he has given me. I don't even want his name. Let me be

myself—just Esther—free. Don't say that I must go back."

"Esther," said Lydyiard, with a deep seriousness in his voice, as he looked at her with his bright, searching eyes—"your mother also craved freedom from a husband whom she hated, but she sought it in the embraces of a lover. You do not love George. Is there any one else whom you do love?"

Esther blushed deeply, but did not shirk the question. "I did not love my husband when I married him," she said in a low voice. "There was some one else whom I did love, but I sent him away, because I felt myself bound by my old promise—and for other reasons. My father's disgrace, and another reason, which seemed to make it impossible for me to become his wife. I thought then that it would be easy to make George happy. I did not realize what my married life would be; how I should writhe away, as it were, from my very self, and hate myself. I—oh! I can't explain; a woman cannot tell any one what she feels about such things; not even to another woman. It is not that I wish to leave my husband because I love another man. To go from one to another, even if the other—if it were possible, would be shameful—revolting—I—there are feelings one cannot put

into words—that one can barely understand—I am weak—I love—I—but I am not like that. You must believe that I am not like that. I am not weak as my mother was—or wicked. I can withstand that temptation.”

There was a touch of scorn in Esther’s voice as she thought of her shattered girlish idol, that moved Lydyiard to wrath. “Esther,” he said sternly, “when I, the husband she betrayed, do not condemn your mother, it is not for you, her daughter, to do so. Your natures are different. She was not, as you are, passionless enough to be pure.”

“Oh, forgive me,” cried Esther; “I did not mean to judge her; but you can hardly understand how bitter it is to me to learn now the true story of her life. She was the angel of my childhood—I always thought of her as sinned against, but never sinning. I loved her for having clung to my father. I loved her for her noble patience; and then when I imagined that she had broken her word to you in order to marry my father, it was the thought of her sorrow and remorse that helped me to be true to George. I seemed to hear her voice, bidding me be loyal to the past—I thought that her spirit was with me . . . but I was mistaken—nothing was of any use. I was wrong . . . she was wrong.”

“Listen to my version of the story,” said Lydyard ; “all that I mean to tell you now. I married her when she was only seventeen, knowing that she did not love me. I fettered her young fresh life against her will, and she was of a nature to struggle, and fret, and resent the unmanliness which conferred obligations upon her, and called upon her to discharge them by giving up herself. She was left penniless and friendless, and I, in my position as Rector of the parish in which she lived, rendered her pecuniary aid which afterwards galled her sorely. You see, Esther, it was in part your own experience. Some day—when I am dead, you shall know the particulars of our married life—but I cannot bear to talk of them now. I was, at the time of our marriage, a clergyman of the Church of England, harassed by doubts and speculations with which she had no sympathy ; for, setting aside her youth and lack of culture, she was an emotional, rather than an intellectual, woman. You know what it is to live in jarring and dissonance ; to shrink from caresses which are hateful ; but you do not know how repugnance on the part of the wife, embitters a husband’s love, and changes it almost into resentment. She rebelled against my efforts to mould her to my way of life and thinking ; and instead of encompassing her with gentle care till

I had gained her heart, or at least, her esteem, I shut myself up with my books, and left her to fret and chafe as she would. She could not guess at the smouldering passion which burned my heart, and made my life a torture instead of a joy. It was not wonderful that in her undisciplined youth, hating her bonds, she turned from me to your father, who had all the advantages of good looks, artistic tastes, and devotion to her whims, and of whose real character she knew nothing. Oh, Esther ! think well over your mother's fate, before you decide upon taking your life into your own hands."

"But it is not as my mother left her husband that I wish to leave George," pleaded Esther insistently. "Between you and her it was all different. You loved her, and would have made her happy if you had been able ; but George is tired of me, and sorry that he married me."

"You think so," said Lydyiard. "You believe that George meant seriously what he said upon an angry impulse ; but I am sure that you are mistaken. Have I not told you that he is like a child, and changes from one mood to another as readily ? You are his wife, and have had better opportunities of studying his character than I have ; but, my poor Esther, you are wrapped in a kind of transcendental egoism, which makes it

impossible for you to enter into the workings of those dispositions that are in the least antagonistic to your own. You have no power of seeing through the window of another consciousness. Your own nature is passionless and elevated, but it has no warmth of human sympathy. This is what you must try and cultivate. You do not know your husband. George is hot where you are cold. He is material where you are abstract. He has all the faults of an impulsive disposition, and a few of the good qualities. He is susceptible to affection, and by a woman who knew her business, might be moulded into a sufficiently decent pattern of a husband. It is your misfortune to be united to such a character, but you must adapt yourself to it. In the crucifixion of your individual temperament, you will find the highest joy of renunciation. Your martyrdom will be its own monument."

"I would change myself if I could," said Esther, with a childlike submission, and a sort of sob in her voice—"I will try to bear if you think I ought—I want to be good—I would be different if I knew how—if I understood what I ought to do. If I could examine myself, and find out where I had been at fault."

"Don't try to examine yourself. Try rather to escape from your tendency to introspection.

Make the lives of others your starting-point. Look outward instead of looking inward, from the point where externals affect your individual emotions. Throw yourself resolutely into interests and pursuits which have taken no hold upon your sympathies, and which you have allowed to slip listlessly past your intelligence. I am speaking of your adaptation of your temperament to that of your husband. You must humanize yourself: you must put a blunt edge upon your susceptibilities. There will be jarring, and variance, and crises in your mutual relations apparently as serious as this one. That will be part of your discipline. You will never touch the key-note of perfect harmony, but you have it before you to strive for, as the true artist makes a religion of ideal excellence . . . It has often come into my mind," continued Lydyiard thoughtfully, "that this dim trace of a system of order that we see pervading every phase of existence—though everywhere it is incomplete and broken up—suggests its realization elsewhere, and is the strongest argument in favour of a perfect unity outside the standing ground of consciousness."

Esther had never before heard Lydyiard speak in this way. It was almost as though the unknowable region to which he was drifting, had

cast its shadow over him already. She looked into his face with a kind of awe, discerning a new spirituality in his expression. Her sense of helplessness and bondage deepened, with the feeling that he was going beyond the immediate circle of her needs. A sob escaped her lips, and she exclaimed: "Oh, I want to be free! I want to be free!"

Lydyiard turned at her voice. "Esther," he said gently, "have you ever thought how it would change the current of your life if you had a child?"

Esther reddened, and a soft tremulousness crept over her face, but she said nothing.

"We had a little child once," said Lydyiard, "your mother and I; but it died when it was a baby. If it had lived she might not have left me. It would have drawn us together. I have often thought of the little thing, Esther, when I have looked at you."

The few words so simply uttered brought more vividly before Esther's imagination the pathetic picture of Mr. Lydyiard's desolate life, than pages of emotional description. He had had a wife whom he had passionately loved, who had deserted him; a child, which had died. Esther bent forward and kissed his hand, the tears gathering in her eyes.

“You are fond of me, Esther,” said Lydyiard.

“I do love you!” she cried. “Oh, if I could only have made you happier!”

“My life has not been unhappy,” answered Lydyiard; “not altogether. It has been lonely, it is true, but I have laboured for humanity—to what end I know not. I trust for good. I selfishly marred one life, and its ghost has haunted my peace; but I have sought, by helping the poor and mistaken to bear their burdens, to make the debtor and creditor account even. There is my colony,” he added thoughtfully. “Those men whom I sent to Mundoolan Island were the leaders of strikes and the helpers in mischievous, so-called free thought, movements. They were clever and well-meaning men in their way; but their perverted minds worked nothing but evil. I placed them in a new field, and they seem to be doing well. My colony has been a source of satisfaction to me, though I could have wished to do much more. It would have been a happiness to me could I have seen my settlers again before my death.”

“You are not going to die!” exclaimed Esther.

“Yes, child, I am dying. I should have gone abroad this winter, had I wished to prolong my life, but I had work to keep me in London. I doubt whether I shall live through another year.

I am sorry to leave you, dear, now. Though I have known comparatively little of you, I have always loved you, and have hoped that you might be happy. To see you in trouble is a grief to me. It is part of my debt to smooth your life as far as I am able. Esther, you would not wish that your husband's life should be embittered by remorse as mine has been?"

"No, no," cried Esther; "but George is not like you. He could never feel as you have felt."

"You cannot judge. Human nature has capabilities which there is no predicting. After your mother left me I had a longing for revenge. I could not have foretold that I should ever feel tenderly towards her, or towards her daughter. I would not even give your father the option of righting her by suing for a divorce. You see that the whole current of my feelings has changed. . . ."

Lydyiard was interrupted by another fit of coughing, which left him at the moment comparatively helpless. He pointed to a bottle of soothing drops which the anxious Mrs. Bridges had placed upon the table, and motioned to Esther to pour him out a draught.

"I am better now," he said presently, "but we must not talk much more at present. I

want to reserve all my strength for to-morrow, when I mean to take you home."

"Home!" repeated Esther blankly.

"Yes," said Lydyiard with decision. "Grately must continue to be your home, unless George of his own free will gives you permission to leave it. You have incurred a responsibility which you cannot shake off merely because you find it heavy. You have no right to deny George the opportunity of retracting a few hasty words which he may now deeply regret. And even, if it were otherwise—should he wish you to leave him, you cannot free him from his yoke. Marriage, in the existing order of society, is not a contract which can be broken by mutual consent. You and George have undertaken duties towards each other which you cannot annul."

"I said that I would be guided by you," said Esther, in a helpless way. "You are wiser than I am. I said that I would do what you thought was right."

"It is right that you should go back to your husband. You may ask him whether he wishes for a separation."

Esther sat for a few moments in painful thought. "Since you say that I must go back, I will do so," she said at length; "but there must not be any mediation. I will see him alone and

will tell him what is in my mind. He shall do what he thinks will be happiest for himself." Lydyiard leaned back almost too exhausted to reply. "Oh ! cried Esther, "all this is bad for you. I ought to leave you."

"There is something to be done yet," said Lydyiard, rousing himself. "I must telegraph to your husband, or will you ?"

"I would rather it was sent in your name."

"Very well ; write at my dictation. You will find forms upon that table."

Esther did as he bade her, and filled in as he directed.

"From William Lydyiard, London.

"To George Brand, Grately.

"Your wife is with me. I bring her back to-morrow—" "When do we arrive ?" asked Lydyiard.

"There is a train from St. Pancras at 12. It reaches Coombe at 2.40," said Esther.

"Meet the 2.40 train from London," dictated Lydyiard. "That will do, and now will you ring ?"

The telegram was despatched, and there then arose a question as to where Esther should pass the night.

Mrs. Bridges declared that there was no room

in Mr. Lydyiard's lodgings fit for Mrs. Brand's occupation, and her master, she added severely, ought not to be worried any more that night.

"I will go to Miss Talmadge," said Esther, the idea striking her. "I should like to see Frederica. I am glad I thought of it. It will be better, too, for you to be quiet."

Mrs. Bridges looked relieved, and called a cab, upon which Esther's portmanteau was placed. Esther bade Mr. Lydyiard good night, arranging to meet him at St. Pancras the following morning, and then drove off to Magenta Terrace.

Only the window of the basement parlour was illuminated, as Esther's cab stopped at Miss Talmadge's house. There was the usual withdrawal of precautionary bolts, and the face of Aunt Theodosia herself, appeared at the aperture.

"Bless me!" she exclaimed, as the candle she held in her hand revealed Esther's pale face and slender figure. "It's Mrs. Brand. You'll excuse my opening the door myself, my love, but I thought it wisest in case of burglars—and you never know what may happen, with valuables in the house. You have come to stay the night. Well it is providential that the bed in the guest-room was aired yesterday, in preparation for the visit of Emily Talmadge—Frederica's sister—my dear; but a letter came this morning to say that

she had caught the mumps, and of course I could not allow Frederica to run any risks just now. She was anxious enough to have her sister ; but, as I said. ‘My love, it is not only yourself to whom the duty of care for your appearance is owing’—and Lady Susan Starkie once had the mumps, and they gathered and had to be lanced, and left a scar for life.”

“What is it ?” cried Frederica from behind. “Oh, Aunt Theodosia, is it really Esther ? Esther, come in out of the cold. I am so glad to see you.”

“And the cabman,” said Miss Talmadge, as the two girls rushed into each other’s arms. “He is waiting for his money. Give me your purse, my love. These men always want to impose. From Norfolk Street, Strand—that is two shillings—and nothing extra for the port-manteau. It was inside. I saw it with my own eyes upon the back seat.”

The man grumbled something about the fog.

“Stuff !” exclaimed Aunt Theodosia. “That is your fare ; so take it and be thankful to a merciful Providence for sending you one at all such an evening as this. Are we to pay for the fog, in addition to having it crammed down our throats ? Not that it is a question of money, for this lady has her own carriage to drive about in,

and a footman on the box into the bargain—but if there's one thing that irritates me it's being imposed upon."

"Now; my love," continued Aunt Theodosia, after she had shut the door with a bang—"the little maid shall carry the portmanteau to the guest room, and you must come downstairs. You know our ways, Esther, and that it is not worth while lighting the fire in the drawing-room when we are alone, and especially as the chairs are peppered and covered up. I had such a fright, my love, the other day; I thought that the moths were getting into my sofa. We won't light the fire, my love, then. Coals are remarkably dear this winter, and Egyptians went down yesterday; and we shall require our spare cash soon, eh, Frederica? and as your husband is not with you—I trust that Captain Brand is enjoying good health. It is a remarkable coincidence, my dear Esther; but as I remarked to Frederica: 'There are few people of any consequence with some of whose connections I have not been at some period of my life on terms of acquaintanceship or intimacy, and Viscount Coniston was quite an old flame of mine—in my visiting days.'"

Esther allowed herself to be led, or rather pushed, down the narrow stairs, Miss Talmadge talking the whole time behind her, and Frederica

with the candle held aloft, a few paces ahead, looking, as she turned at the foot and faced her friend, Esther thought, prettier and happier than she ever remembered to have seen her.

The table was laid for tea. The kettle simmered by the grate, and the second-best salver, with the Talmadge and Glencairne arms in high relief, shone resplendent upon the sideboard. The funny little pictures and brackets were still on the walls, and the small ottoman-box in which Miss Talmadge kept her best table cover, "ready to pop on, my love, in case any one should come in unexpectedly," was upon one side of the fireplace. There stood the old cracked piano, with a piece of Frederica's music, that Bernard had been fond of, on the desk, and the morocco-covered chair, a little browner than of yore, in the corner. It seemed to Esther as though she had passed through years of painful and exciting experience since all these things had been so familiar to her.

"Now, my dear Esther," said Miss Talmadge, "Frederica and I were just going to sit down to our tea, for, as you know, my love, we make our dinner at one o'clock, but with you it is different; so it was with me in the days when I lived with dinner company—but, my love, there is a beef-steak pie in the larder. The crust is lovely, and

cuts as crisp as a pastry-cook's. I made it myself,—and a veal cutlet which is delicious with a squeeze of lemon, and could be cooked for you in a moment; and perhaps, as you are accustomed to a hot meal in the evening—”

“Dear Miss Talmadge,” said Esther; “let me have some bread and butter; indeed I want nothing more.”

“Now really; do you mean that, my love? Well, I know that after high living plain fare is often a pleasant change, and the dear friend of my youth, Lady Susan Starkie, used often to assure me that the sauces and made dishes she ate at the Marquis of Trenton's—her brother—were enough to poison any one. The cooks in grand houses have no conscience. Well, my love, if you *like* bread and butter, this is aërated bread which could not injure any one's digestion, and that is butter from the Reformed Dairy Company, and is a little cheaper than what you usually buy, but is excellent. Now, wouldn't you take an egg?—there is a great deal of sustenance in an egg, especially if you swallow it raw; or the cutlet—I assure you that we are quite accustomed to providing something substantial upon occasions, now that we have a gentleman in the family, so to speak.”

“Oh, Aunt Theodosia!” cried Frederica, with

a deep sudden blush. "Let Esther rest and have her tea, and then no one must tell her but I."

"Tell me what?" asked Esther. "Have you got a studio, Frederica?—or a dozen orders for portraits?—or a new master?—or—are you going to be married?"

"My dear," said Aunt Theodosia, "a Glencairne has never died single for the want of asking; and I always said from the very first, that Mr. Comyn, though not quite so finished a gentleman—"

"Bernard!" interrupted Esther, a sudden suspicion which became speedily a certainty flashing across her. "What has Bernard to do with it? Oh, Frederica!—you don't mean that he—that you—why did you not tell me?"

"It only happened a very few days ago, dear Esther," said Frederica, drawing closer. "I wrote last night, but you must have left home this morning before the letter arrived. Yes; it is true, Esther, that he cares for me. I don't know what I have done to deserve such happiness. Oh! what is the matter? Are you ill?"—for Esther had slipped away from her, and had fallen fainting upon the floor.

CHAPTER X.

AN IMPERFECT UNION.

ESTHER lay awake almost all night, crushed by the mental excitement she had undergone, but with the tension of her nerves still too great to allow her to sleep.

The sudden tidings of Bernard's engagement to Frederica had touched her in a manner which a few months, or even weeks ago, she could have hardly believed possible. Had the announcement been made to her in the regular series of events, when the ordinary course of her home-life had held out no prospect of any violent upheaval, she could have borne it with a less keen pain; but now that her whole existence seemed out of gear, and her emotions strung to their highest pitch, by that subtle intoxication which had almost carried her out of herself, it came upon her with a numbing shock that left behind a dull pain and half-listless disgust.

Her interview with Bernard that afternoon, though fraught with poignant suffering, had yet

had for her an indescribable sweetness. His expression and manner had conveyed to her the assurance that she was still deeply loved, and she would have been something less or more than woman had she been indifferent to the knowledge. The passionate longing and half-resolve, which had been in his eyes, though she had barely understood it, had thrilled her with joy. And now it seemed to her that all men were alike, and that love meant only with them the turning from one pretty face to another as the fancy took them. It was like the shattering of her most secretly-worshipped idol, the levelling of that last altar upon which she might burn the incense of her faith in man.

Esther turned upon her pillow with a moan, such as one is apt to utter when weary with a gnawing pain. Then she took herself to task for her selfish inconsistency, and half-hearted renunciation. Had she not given up Bernard to Frederica long ago? Ought she not to rejoice now in the culmination of her sacrifice, instead of being meanly resentful of her friend's happiness. Surely it was but a petty, dog-in-the-manger selfishness that could grudge to those she loved, a joy that was beyond her own reach, and of which she could not take to herself the merit of voluntary resignation.

Frederica came into her bed-room before she herself went to bed, just as in the old days when Esther had spent her holidays at Magenta Terrace. She tucked Esther up, and lingered, with that feminine longing for the interchange of confidence, which, now that Esther was married to her first love, and she, Frederica, engaged to the man of her choice, seemed so natural between them.

“Oh, Esther!” she said softly, blushing at the same time—“isn’t it wonderful that he should care for me? And then to think that from the very first I should have set him apart, as it were, from all other men. It must be a great joy to a wife to feel that she has never loved any man but her husband,” Frederica went on, unconscious of the stab she was inflicting—“and that is the happiness which you and I, dear Esther, must always have. It is like you and George. There must be a fate that brings people who love each other together.”

Poor Esther turned her head away with an involuntary cry of pain. “I must not talk to you, dear,” said Frederica. “I’m afraid that you are overwrought and nervous, and that you have done too much to-day. Shopping is so tiring, and I suppose that was what you came up for. We have had no time for talking, and I must not keep you awake any longer. You must be

very careful, dear Esther, now," added Frederica, with a little blush. For Aunt Theodosia, with her usual facility of conviction, had settled satisfactorily to herself the cause of Esther's sudden fainting fit, and had communicated her notion to her niece.

"There is one thing that I must tell you before I go," said Frederica, as she moved on tiptoe round the bed, smoothing the pillows and shading the night-light. "He says that I am to have a studio built on purpose, and to go on just the same with my work. We shan't be very rich, dear; and it is such a happiness to feel that I may be able to help. While I am painting he will study and write. He thinks that husbands and wives should have interests beyond mere every-day pursuits. You know he always said that his wife must not be a household drudge or a pretty toy, but a companion. I am so thankful that we like the same things, and that I know something about music. Not that I am intellectual, or a companion fit for him, dear Esther; but he thinks me good enough; and at least I shall be able to sympathize and admire. Now I must not talk any more. Good night, dearest; I hope that you will be rested to-morrow."

Upon the following morning there was but little opportunity for mutual confidence between

the girls, for Esther came down pale and wearied, and was obliged to submit passively to being fussed over by Miss Talmadge ; but just before her departure she drew Frederica aside and kissed her, whispering : “ I could not tell you last night, dear, that I was glad of your happiness—but indeed, indeed I am. Oh, Frederica ! you will make Bernard happy because you love him, and his content will be your joy ; but don’t expect too much, dearest. Sometimes marriage is difficult—life is difficult—and we have to be satisfied with less than we expected.”

“ Have you found it so, Esther ? ” asked Frederica, looking at her earnestly.

“ One expects too much,” said Esther confusedly, thinking of Lydyiard’s lessons. “ We think—some of us, perhaps—that everything is to be in tune to us ; and we don’t try to adapt ourselves to our lives. They would be less difficult if we were different. Oh it is hard—it is hard—to wake up too late ! I want you to give Bernard a message from me,” she added, hurrying on to the subject that was weighing upon her. “ Tell him that I sent it by you. It is ‘ Good-bye ’ ; for I don’t think that I shall see him for a long time.”

“ You will come to our wedding, dear Esther,” said Frederica. “ The time is not quite fixed

yet; but I do not think it will be very long before we are married."

"No, no," exclaimed Esther, "I could not; that is, I do not know where I may be. Tell Bernard that I could not write now, but that I will by-and-by; and that I hope and pray that you and he may be happy together."

Esther hastily pulled down her veil, for the tears were starting to her eyes. Frederica wondered at her agitation, but attributed it to her state of health, and to the fatigue she had undergone. The two girls clung to each other and kissed as though they were parting for a long while. Each had the inner consciousness of a new life dawning before her; and felt that neither would be quite the same when they should meet again. Then Esther departed in the four-wheeler which the little maid had called from round the corner. Miss Talmadge stood upon the doorstep and waved an impressive good-bye.

"Adieu, my love. My kindest regards to Captain Brand, and you will be sure to tell him that I was intimately acquainted with his late uncle, Lord Coniston, in my visiting days. And Esther, my dear child, allow plenty of time, and make the man drive gently; and the fare is half-a-crown at the very most—with the portmanteau inside."

Lydyiard, looking very frail, and smothered in wraps, was waiting on the platform ; and the two travelled down to Coombe together almost in silence. There were other people in the carriage, and Esther felt it impossible to talk upon ordinary topics. At the station the brougham from Grately was waiting, and the coachman touched his hat as his mistress appeared. This simple act brought Esther back, as it were, to everyday life. The tragedy seemed to have settled down into commonplace ; and a chasm yawned between the experience of to-day and that of yesterday. She could hardly believe that scarcely more than twenty-four hours had elapsed since, in a state of mental and physical high pressure, she had quitted her husband's house.

Mr. Lydyiard pressed Esther's hand sympathetically as the carriage drew up at the front door. She was white and trembling at the thought of meeting George, but the hall was empty save of the servants, and as Curtis respectfully opened the carriage door, he said :

"I think, ma'am, ~~that~~ my master is in the stables. He went out a few minutes ago, to look at a new horse ; shall I let him know that you have arrived ?"

"No," replied Esther, with a sickening sense of gratitude for the respite. "Don't interrupt

Captain Brand. When he comes in, tell him that I am in the boudoir. You would like to go to your room," she said, turning to Lydyiard, who was coughing in the doorway. "Oh, come in—pray don't stand in the draught. Curtis, which rooms have been prepared for Mr. Lydyiard?"

"I believe the blue rooms, ma'am."

"You would like some luncheon upstairs," continued Esther; "it will be better for you than coming down again. You must rest all the afternoon. Let something to eat be taken to Mr. Lydyiard's room at once—some soup, and chicken, and jelly; tell Mrs. Horner it is for an invalid." Repeating her orders, Esther herself led Lydyiard upstairs to the blue rooms, and made him lie down upon the sofa in a little sitting-room adjoining them—arranging the pillows for his head, and fussing about the blinds, as much in nervousness as in solicitude. "How good you are to me!" she murmured, returning again to his sofa; "no one else would have come when they were so ill."

Lydyiard looked up at her with great tenderness.

"Nay; it is you who are good. Esther, I almost wish that you might be with me till I die, but for your own sake it must not be so. My child, be gentle and submissive to your husband. It is your duty."

Esther kissed his forehead silently, and left the room. She went downstairs again, and entered the boudoir, the most homelike part of the house to her. Brand was standing by the mantel-piece with his hands in his pockets, looking moodily down at the hearth-rug. He had returned from the stables while she had been upstairs with Mr. Lydyiard. Esther advanced, trembled, and hesitated. He looked worried and anxious. In truth, he had been sorely harassed since, upon returning the night before, he had found her note and Mr. Lydyiard's telegram awaiting him. He had suffered a good many pangs of remorse. The evening had been very dull. There had been a disagreeable letter from his banker by second post. Everything had contributed to his annoyance, and he had missed his wife more than he could have believed possible.

Esther had half-expected that he would greet her with a storm of reproaches and anger, but George's moods were somewhat incalculable. He looked up almost indifferently.

"Well; so you have come back!"

"Yes, George," said Esther, faintly.

"What did you go away for? You had no business to leave home without letting me know your reasons. How was I to know what had become of you?"

"I told you, in the note I left for you, that I had gone to London."

"What does that mean? London might be anywhere. Making a fool of me—letting me come home to find you gone—and setting the servants talking; I call it damnably cool." George walked up and down the room in a quick, irritated way, and then stopped again at the fireplace. "Mousie," he said, in a gentler tone, "why did you go away without telling me? You must have known that it would annoy me. Did you do it on purpose? Was it because you were angry with me, or what? Oh, hang it all! Let us have done with this. I can't stand it. I was perfectly miserable last night—ate no dinner, and never slept a wink. And I have got an infernal headache this morning, all through bothering about you, and worrying over money-matters and things. Let us have done with this sparring and wretchedness."

"George," said Esther, "I want to have done with it?"

"It's deucedly unpleasant," continued George. "I don't know why we are always having rows. Other husbands and wives live happily together; why should not we? I'm sure I don't want to quarrel. Come and give me a kiss, Mousie, and let us make it up for good and all."

“George,” said Esther, trying to speak calmly, though in fact she was struggling against rising sobs—“I can’t make it up like that. You seem to think that cruel things may be said and done, and that then our married life is to go on as though there had been no bitterness in it ; but I am different to you. What I feel deeply does not glide from my mind so easily. The wounds remain and rankle, and I cannot help shrinking with dread lest you should hurt me in the same way again.”

“I don’t mean to hurt you, Esther. You should not take to heart what I say when I am vexed. I don’t think of it afterwards.”

“I must tell you everything that is in my mind,” continued Esther, “and you shall choose for yourself. I wanted to leave you. I could not bear the feeling that I was a burden upon you, and that I made you miserable. I could not bear your taunts and reproaches. I hated my marriage. I hated myself. I think that I have sometimes almost hated you. I wanted to be free—and to free you from my presence. I thought that you would be happier if I went away from you altogether ; and I went to London, to Mr. Lydyard. There was no one else whom I could ask to help me. He has always been kind to me. He loved my mother. I knew

that he would tell me the truth. I felt that I had been deceived in everything; in you, in myself, in my mother. Everything seemed blank—even Heaven, for I think of her as being there. All my longing was to escape—from my marriage,—from you. I felt degraded. And then There came the feeling that if I had married differently, I might have been different—I might not have been unloving—as you say I am But I struggled. I said that I would do as Mr. Lydyiard bade me. You know that I *want* to be good. I never meant to come back again, but he made me. He told me that it was forsaking my duty, and that it was wrong and unfair not to let you decide. He said that I could not do away with our marriage, and that I had no right to settle our lives without your consent. So I have come back.”

“Of course you have come back,” interrupted George with ironical anger. “What else could you do? It was all very well to leave me in high tragedy fashion; but a night’s reflection must have shown you on which side your bread was buttered. Of course you could not live apart from me without my consent and without money, and I had the law on my side; not a jury in England could have forced me to give you a maintenance.”

“What am I to say?” cried Esther passionately. “You *will* misconstrue me, and attribute low, mean motives to me. How can I make you understand? I hate your money—and this house—and everything my marriage has brought me. To be free and independent, even if I had to starve, is all I care for.”

“Then go and starve,” exclaimed George, “and be independent. I don’t want to hinder you. It will be cheaper for me than keeping you here. Go and starve or work. You’ll soon wish yourself back again. I’m hanged if I do understand you.”

Esther turned proudly away. “Then you consent to our being separated.”

“Oh, if you like,” replied George. “I don’t propose it, remember. It is your doing. You are to blame for whatever comes of it. If you like, you may go; only understand that you don’t get a penny from me.”

He turned round and looked down into the fire, with his arms resting upon the mantel-piece, and his head upon them. Esther stood by the table, her heart swelling, her lips quivering. He had said that she might go, but she did not know whether or no he meant his words. It was impossible that she could leave him so. If she did so, she must feel all her life afterwards as though

she had taken advantage of the wrath of an impatient child. She stood motionless, debating within herself, not daring either to advance or to retreat.

George looked sharply round. "What are you waiting for? You want to leave me. Why don't you go."

"George," said Esther faintly; "you are deciding both our lives."

"Oh, d—n our lives!" cried George. "I have nothing to do with it. I don't care what becomes of either of us. You said that you wanted to go, and I won't keep you against your will. What is the use of caring for a woman, and making a sacrifice for her? One gets nothing but ingratitude. . . I bought a new horse this morning—for you, so that you might have the carriage when you wanted it. What was the use of it? You don't care how much I think of you, or try to please you. . . You had better go, and have done with it all."

"I will," cried Esther, with difficulty keeping herself from bursting into a fit of hysterical crying; "but I can't part like this. We have been husband and wife. George, don't let us part in anger. If we both think that we are unsuited to each other, and that we had better separate, at least don't let us say good-bye in anger."

At her pleading words, and the break in her voice, George lifted his head. His own tones were tremulous.

“I never said that you were unsuited to me, Mousie. I don’t want you to go. I don’t mean to be unkind to you. You think that I don’t love you because I don’t understand you. If you liked we could be happy together; I am sure that we could, if you would forget everything that has passed.”

Esther looked up at him with a doubtful longing, mingled with hesitation, in her large eyes, evident through the mist of gathering tears. George, though not apt at reading such dumb language, saw her impulse towards him and her irresolution. Her helpless perplexity, and the large drops that had begun to fall, touched the softest part of his nature, and brought the moisture into his own eyes. He was at her side in a moment, and pressed his handkerchief with a boy-like awkwardness against her eyelids, wiping away her tears, and trying to still the gasping sobs which shook her.

“Don’t cry, Mousie,” he said huskily. “What is the use of crying? I mean to be good to you. Don’t be afraid and unhappy. I’ll promise never to say anything unkind to you again. Don’t cry. It is because you are tired and hysterical. I

can't bear to hear you sobbing ; it makes me feel such a brute. I'll go and get you a glass of wine."

He made her sit down, and ran to the dining-room. Curtis was not there, and the cellaret was locked. It was like George to ring the bell violently and scold the butler when he appeared. " Confound you !—why don't you leave the thing open ? " and then he came back to the boudoir with a glass of port wine in his hand, spilling it in his anxiety, and almost irritating Esther by his efforts to pour it down her throat. " It is only because you are tired and hysterical," he repeated, anxious to bring down her emotion to a physical basis ; " and you want some luncheon. That is an abominably awkward train from St. Pancras, for luncheon."

At that moment the gong sounded. " Come, Mousie," said George. " You are all right now ; aren't you ? Then let me wipe the poor little eyes. The servants must not see that you have been crying, or they might think we had quarrelled."

George laughed in his light-hearted resilience as though the matter had been an excellent joke, and tenderly taking his wife upon his arm led her into the dinning-room.

It was all bewildering to Esther. Tragedy

and drawing-room comedy seemed unaccountably mixed up together. She found it difficult to realize that only a few moments ago she had been contemplating the desperate step of separating herself from her husband, now that they were sitting together at luncheon as though their lives had never been inharmonious, with Curtis behind her offering her cold chicken, and George overwhelming her with lover-like attentions. A kind of helpless stupefaction came over her—a sense of having played at melodrama and taken it for earnest. All her outraged pride and wounded sensibility was to go for nothing. She had simply taken up existence from a lower level; and George's handsome face opposite her, from which the lines of anxiety had been smoothed with wonderful rapidity, and which brought vividly before her the remembrance of their first meal together upon the island, was henceforth to represent the apex of her aspirations.

"Where is Lydyiard?" asked George suddenly. "I thought he was with you."

"He is upstairs," replied Esther. "He must rest quietly this afternoon. He is very ill. It was most kind of him to bring me down. He has a shocking cough, and I am afraid that he is failing."

"Ill?" repeated George. "I am sorry to hear

that. He is a good-hearted fellow, is Lydyiard. But he'll be down to dinner, I suppose. You are eating scarcely anything, Mousie."

"I am not hungry," replied Esther, the hysterical tears rising again.

"I want you to come out and look at the new horse," continued George. "You did for Roadster's legs that day, Esther. The long drive to Allerton was too much for him. He was dead lame the next morning. But women have no idea how to treat horses. Where is your cloak, dear? Shall I get you one?"

"I think that I would rather not go out to the stables now," said Esther, longing hysterically to be alone, and wounded by his allusion to Allerton which she thought tactless and unnecessary.

George looked disappointed. "That is always the way when I want you to do anything. I thought that you would be interested in a new horse that I was buying expressly for you; but you never care to do what I like."

"I will come," said Esther rising, with feeble desperation. It was a very little thing, but the sense of bondage had begun already. George wrapped her cloak tenderly round her, and she followed him into the stable-yard, and tried to awaken a languid interest in the new purchase. Lydyiard, whose window looked out towards the

stables, saw them in the distance standing together, Esther drooping and tremulous, her eyes most often on the ground, and George addressing the grooms in a lordly manner, though Lydyiard could not hear his voice, as the horse was walked and trotted before him, and every now and then turning with a remark to his wife.

They went on to look at the new stalls which were being added to the former accommodation. "It will cost a lot of money," said George, moodily—"this cursed improving; I wish that I had never gone in for it. I don't think I told you that I had had a letter from the Bank about the overdrawing of my account. I am thinking of selling one of the outlying farms at Degly; but there's a difficulty about that, in these bad times, and the farmers are clamouring for lower rents. It is a confounded bore being so hampered for money. I wish—"

"What?" cried Esther sharply, her nerves in a state of strained expectancy which demanded even the food of irritation.

"Oh, that somebody would die and leave me a fortune," said George. "I know what you thought was coming out, Mousie, but I am never going to say that again."

The afternoon was waning before George would allow Esther to leave him, and then

she felt it impossible to go to Lydyiard and communicate the result of her interview with her husband. She sent her maid with a message to ask if he was better, and to tell him the dinner-hour, and then lay down herself upon a couch in her dressing-room. Worn out by fatigue and mental excitement, she fell asleep, and was only awakened by the sound of the gong, and by George as he bent over her with the intimation that it was time to dress for dinner.

George was considerably shocked at the change in Lydyiard's appearance when they met in the drawing-room. "I am sure it was very good of you to bring Esther down; but, good Lord, how ill you look. I'm afraid you weren't fit for the journey."

"It will not hurt me," replied Lydyiard, stifling his hollow cough. "I am a little tired. I travelled up from Bournemouth yesterday."

Esther pressed his arm with a tender significance as he took her in to dinner. Of course nothing was said before the servants of the late domestic difficulty. George talked about the season's hunting, the agricultural depression, and the dulness of the midland counties in March and April, and announced his intention of going shortly to Paris, and taking his wife with him. "It will do us both good," he said. "My

liver is out of order, and Esther wants stirring up. It's an early Easter this year, and there's always plenty going on in Paris after Lent."

"You had better go to bed, Mousie," he said, as she rose after dessert. "You look like a ghost, and Lydyiard and I shall have a good deal to say to each other."

"I suppose," began George, when she had left the room, helping himself to claret, and looking a little awkwardly at Lydyiard as he passed the decanter—"I suppose Esther told you that we had had a slight difference before she went to London; but it is all made up now between us."

"No more wine, thank you," said Lydyiard. "I was surprised to find," he added, looking George straight in the face, with both anger and condemnation in his eyes, "that you had broken your word, given me before your marriage, not to repeat to Esther what I had told you about her mother."

George flushed. "What do you mean?" he said, evasively.

"You deliberately broke your promise," said Lydyiard.

"I don't think that a promise given like that, before marriage, ought to be considered binding," said George. "Circumstances alter cases. It is impossible to keep a secret from one's wife—it is

bound to come out sooner or later. I don't see how a man could live with a woman, and have words with her, as all husbands and wives do, without a thing like that cropping up—and I hate mysteries. It is not my way to bottle up what I think and feel. I am always saying things which I regret afterwards, and I regret this. I am ready to allow that I was wrong. I am confoundedly sorry about the whole affair.”

“You remember our conversation in the billiard-room at Allerton,” said Lydyiard. “I fancy that my judgment of your character then, was more correct than your own. I foresaw such consequences of your marriage, and warned you of them. You have been married scarcely a year, and have already repented of your bargain. You have nearly driven your wife from you—you have estranged what affection she felt for you, have galled her pride, and wounded her sensitive feelings by making it evident to her that you regret your choice.”

“I may have said a few hasty words,” said George, speaking hurriedly and uneasily; “but Esther knows that I always forgot them immediately afterwards. I did not mean to hurt her feelings. It is a bore to have such a sensitive wife. All fellows are irritated sometimes, and ready to think they might have done better for

themselves. She was foolish to take up anything I said in a moment of annoyance, as though I really meant it. A man who has married a penniless girl, can't help feeling sometimes that heiresses are not to be despised, especially if he is harassed about money-matters, as I have been of late. But you are mistaken if you think that I really repent my marriage. I am as fond of Esther as I ever was, and what I said to her about her mother would never have passed my lips if she had not, a few moments before, told me that she did not care a rush for me. A man can't stand that sort of thing from a wife for whom he has sacrificed everything—as you know."

"And when he has just given her full reason to believe that she is a distasteful encumbrance to him," said Lydyiard, drily. "A wife, even if she be not violently in love with her husband, must be super-human indeed, if she can look on calmly while he is flirting desperately with another woman, whom she knows he has once thought of marrying."

"Oh, Esther has told you all about Allerton!" exclaimed George. "Upon my word she seems to have made a clean breast of her troubles. You don't know what it is, I suppose, Lydyiard, to be shut up with a fascinating girl, about whom you have always been a little sentimental, when

you are slightly at loggerheads with your wife ? Lina Welby is going to be married to the Bishop of Woodchester, and I shan't have the chance of flirting with her again ; Esther may make her mind easy on that score. Not that I want to flirt, or that there was serious meaning in anything I said or did. I have kissed Lina's hand a hundred times, and have made pretty speeches by the score. She understands perfectly that I have only been half in earnest. She is a very pretty little thing, and I was always fond of her ; but as to comparing my liking for her with what I feel about Esther, that is absurd."

"I am glad to hear you say so," said Lydyiard. "You relieve my mind of a weight. A third person, George, who interposes himself as peacemaker between husband and wife usually finds himself in a false position, but I think that I have a right to speak."

"Say what you like, Lydyiard ; I shall not be annoyed."

"Esther's happiness is dearer to me than that of any one else in the world. I should like to feel satisfied about her future before my death."

"You are not going to die, old fellow," exclaimed George. "I am sorry to see you with such a horrid cough ; but surely a winter abroad will set you right."

"I shall not live through another winter," said Lydyiard gravely. "I mean to go abroad next month, but I feel certain that I shall never return. That was my principal reason for bringing back Esther myself. I wanted to have a few words with you. I am closing my career; you are almost at the beginning of yours. You know that the early part of my life was embittered by an unhappy marriage; but you can hardly realize how deeply all the rest has been saddened by remorse. I have told you how I came to marry Esther's mother. Had I, having selfishly fettered her young life, tried to win her affections by patient tenderness, the end might have been different. Do not give yourself the same cause for self-reproach. I think that you love Esther in your heart."

"I do," cried George, touched by Lydyiard's earnestness. "I would do anything now to make her happy."

"Then try to win her to you by gentleness and consideration of her peculiarities. Don't expect too much from her. She is easily touched, sensitive, and yearning for sympathy. Tenderness, not passion, is what she craves. She has not the power of loving fiercely, but her affection is better worth gaining than that of most women, for her nature is deeper. Her pride is easily

galled, and you have gone rough-shod over her sensibilities. You have much to retrieve. She is smarting painfully now under the notion that you married her in an impulse of passion, which has died out, and that you repent what you have done, on account of her poverty, and the stigma upon her birth. You have made her dependence bitter to her."

"I am sorry," cried George, with eager contrition. "You know that I did not mean to wound her. I will do anything I can to make amends."

"You can only do that by gentle tact, and by showing her in every way possible, that you prize her for her own sake. You will in future have no cause to regret having married a penniless woman."

"What do you mean?" asked George.

"You gave me to understand just now," said Lydyiard, without directly answering him, "that you were embarrassed for money. Is it so?"

"Yes," said George. "In fact I hardly know where to turn. My uncle left me the estate in such a manner that I cannot mortgage, and can only sell a portion of the outlying land at Degley, which is worth next to nothing now. I suppose that I have been going too fast. I'm hanged if I know what has become of my year's income.

This is a deucedly expensive place to keep up. Marriage is expensive. Hunting is expensive. And I have been making some improvements, which I wish I had never begun. It seems to me that everything one cares to do, and a great deal that one doesn't like doing, costs money. There were outstanding debts when I came into the property, and the farmers haven't half paid up. Thompson, the lawyer, is always at me to retrench, and I had an unpleasant letter from the Bank yesterday. I am thinking of shutting the place up, and then I shall have to live in some piggish hole abroad for a year or two. I suppose that I *must* raise money on the estate somehow."

"Have you any objection to telling me what amount it would take to clear you, and to carry you on for a year at your present rate of expenditure, without making any allowance for improvements or needless extravagance?"

George drank another glass of wine, and thought for a moment or two. "Thompson could tell you directly, but it is difficult to calculate offhand what one's expenses are. My over draft is £5000."

"Then £9000 ought to clear you, and cover every outlay. I will give you a cheque, to-morrow, George, for that sum. Don't begin to thank

me. I am not so generous out of pure consideration for you. I think it would do you a great deal of good to be obliged to economize ; but I don't want Esther to suffer, and it is only forestalling by a little what she would do herself. This is what I wanted to tell you. I determined some time ago to make your wife my heiress. When I die she will have everything I possess, with the exception, that is to say, of a sum set apart for the benefit of my colonists upon Munday Island, and several smaller amounts for other purposes. The remainder will be no inconsiderable fortune, though perhaps hardly equal to what Miss Welby will bring her husband. As long as you and Esther live together, you will jointly enjoy the interest. Should you be separated, she will have the control of her income. The principal will be settled strictly upon her, afterwards to be divided equally among your children. In the event of there being no children, Esther will have the power of willing it as she pleases."

"I cannot thank you sufficiently for your generous present," began George. "I hardly know what to say—how to express my——"

"There is no need to say anything," replied Lydyard. "You may perhaps think that I have placed too much power in your wife's

hands ; but these are my intentions, and I was anxious that you should know them before I leave England. I have a conviction that I shall never return. I think that we understand each other, George. My great desire is to secure Esther's happiness. Her future is confided to you, and I have more trust that you will deal with it kindly than I had a year ago."

Lydyiard held out his hand, his bright, feverish eyes fixed searchingly upon George's face.

George took the outstretched hand, and pressed it with fervency. "You may trust me."

"And now that we have had our talk," continued Lydyiard, "I will bid you good night, for I am tired after my two days' travelling."

A glimpse at the married future of Esther and Brand would not perhaps reveal a condition of perfect inward accord. Life would not be what it is, if two antagonistic natures, starting with an entire divergence of thought and temperament, could in a short time develop into a state of complete harmony. As Lydyiard had predicted, there has always been, and will be to the end, between husband and wife a faint jarring of discordant notes, a lack of sympathy in much that appertains to the inner lives of both.

The shy reserve of a spirit that is nervously

afraid of being misunderstood, and conscious of its own sensitiveness, holds Esther a little aloof from the outer world. She seems to be unconsciously making a tacit protest against the materialization of her aims and feelings. The somewhat Jesuitical tact which she finds it necessary to exercise in smoothing Brand's wayward humours clashes with her love of truth; while, upon his side, there is an impulsive inconsistency, an absence of any recognized standard of right, or reliability of character, a constant demand upon the forbearance and generosity of those nearest him, and a want of delicate consideration for others, that makes domestic relationship with him something like dealing with a fractious undisciplined child whom it is unpleasant to contradict.

George has never held the key to his wife's truer sensibilities, but they seem a fairly attached couple; and as, with time, children have been born to them, and have cemented their mutual interests more closely, their union has acquired all the semblance of happiness. Material existence, thanks to Lydyiard, runs upon well-oiled wheels, and this is a circumstance likely to go far in securing Brand's satisfaction with the world and with himself.

Of his eldest child, a boy, George is intensely

proud, and passionately fond. He is a fine, manly little fellow, and his father's companion out of doors, but Esther's heart is more wrapped up in a lame girl, who is sensitive and dreamy-eyed, and resembles her mother in features.

Lydyiard left England soon after his first and only visit to Grately. He grew gradually worse, and died at Cannes, in the winter of the same year.

Not long ago, on the occasion of a musical festival at Woodchester, I met the Brands at the Bishop's Palace. Bernard and Frederica were among the guests also. Bernard has grown stout, and is slightly dogmatical. He takes vigorous exercise every day, after a morning spent in literary labours which yield him a fair income. Frederica is a little more matronly, and certainly more attractive. She does not paint much now, except in the matter of art decoration for her home. Her children follow each other far too rapidly not to interfere with the practice of her profession, but she does not miss it, and is apt to say that a woman has sufficient to occupy her mind in her own home-circle without any extraneous interest. She has one of her sisters to live with her—the other is with Aunt Theodosia—and is a devoted mother, and extremely grateful to her husband for submitting kindly to adoration.

Lina makes an excellent wife to the Bishop ; and though it is always necessary to make allowances for her, she is, on the whole, very popular among the clerical society in Woodchester. The Palace is noted for its dinners, and for the social atmosphere which pervades it.

“My dears,” said Mrs. Prendergast the other evening—“I find the bosom of the Church a most comforting haven. I know, you nice, romantic persons, that you are inwardly thinking me a frump ; but I hope I shall never become so clerical as to dislike salt with my egg—figuratively speaking—and I can preside cheerfully over any number of county functions, if only I may be allowed to have my fun out of them afterwards.”

THE END.



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